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THE HOUSE OF THE SORCERER



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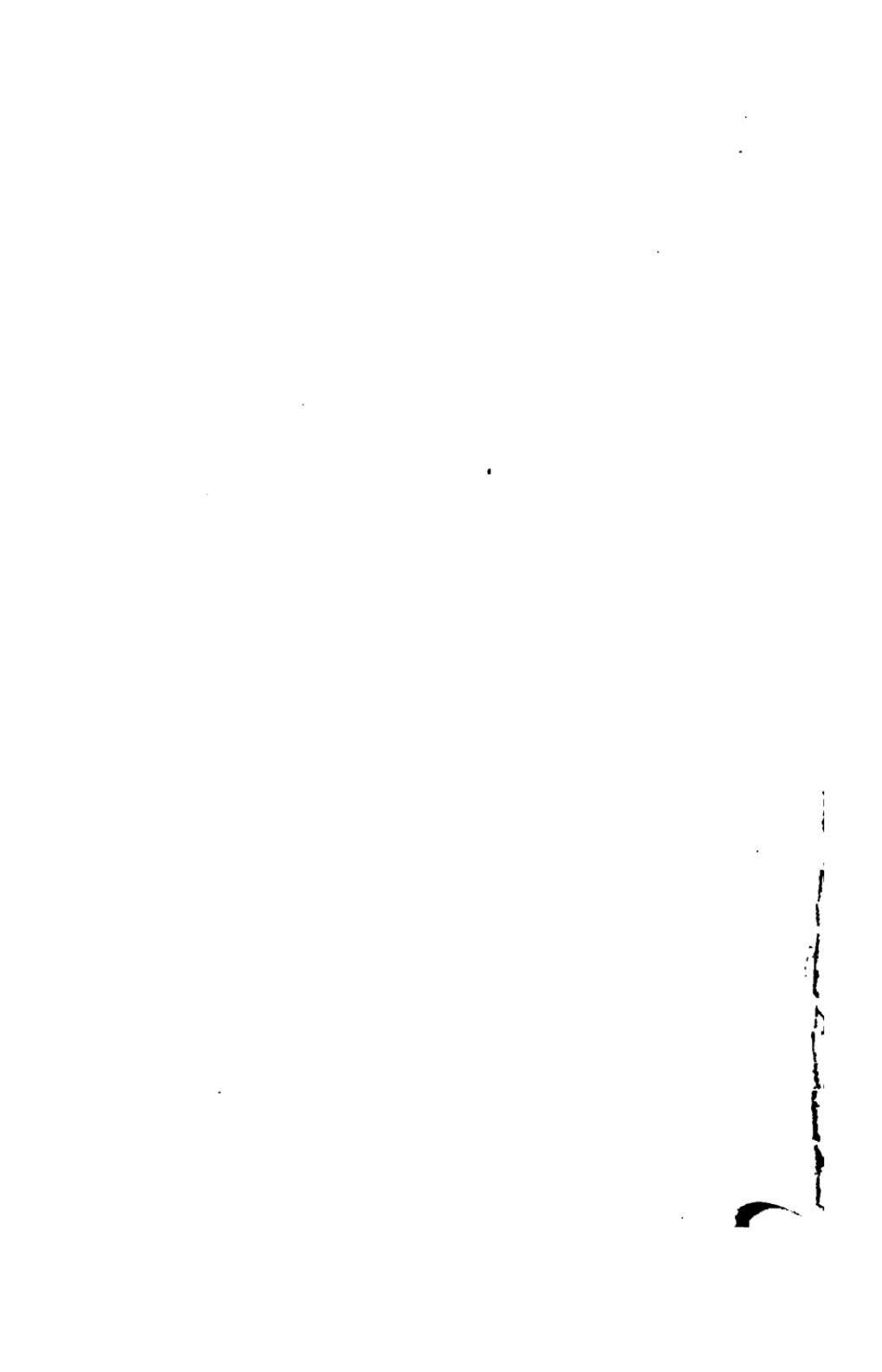
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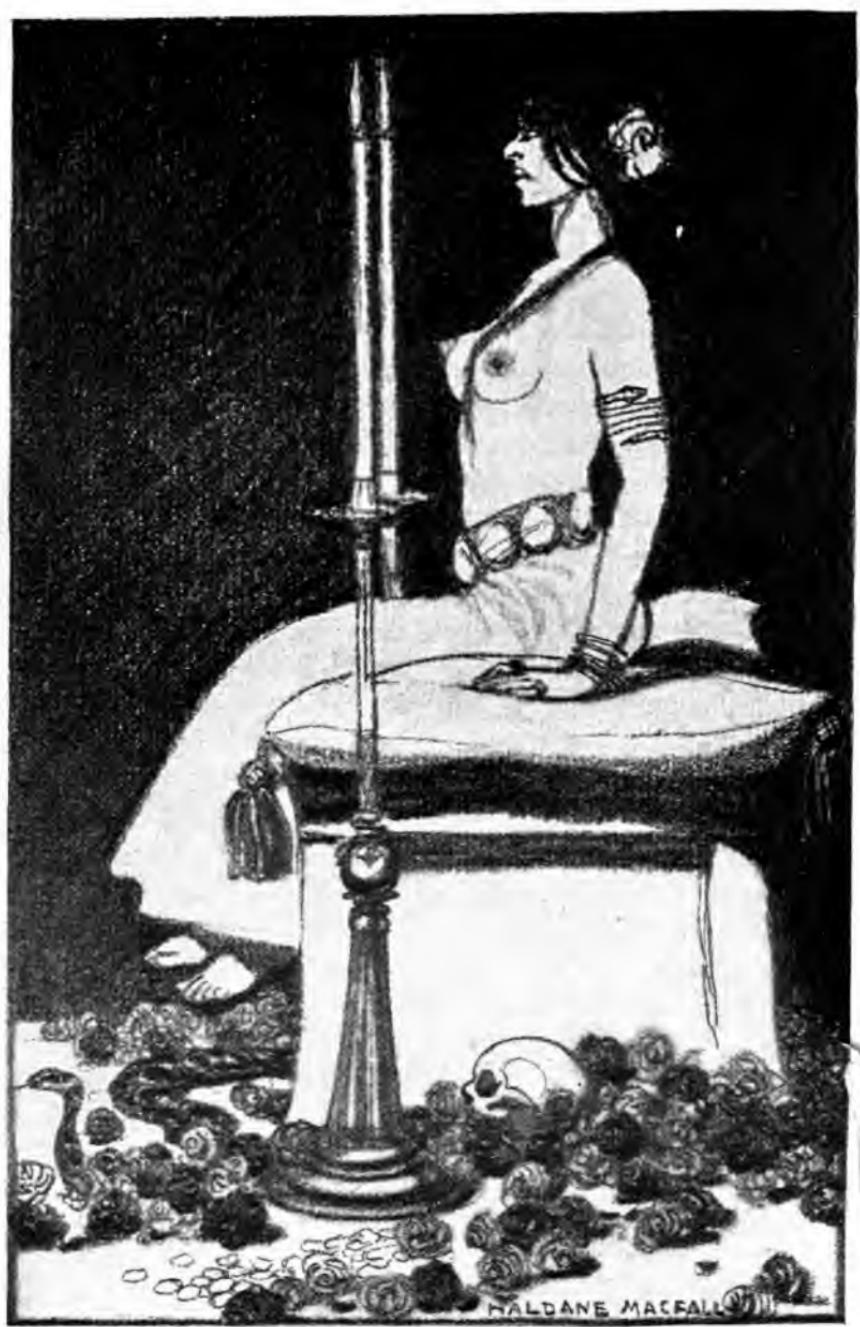
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**THE HOUSE OF THE
SORCERER**





HALDANE MACFALL

THE HOUSE OF THE SORCERER

*Being an account of certain
things that have been reported*

Here set down.

By

HALDANE MACAULAY.



EDITION

Richard G. Badger & Co.

1908



THE HOUSE OF THE SORCERER

Being an account of certain
things that chanced therein

Here set down

By
HALDANE MACFALL



BOSTON
Richard G. Badger & Co.

1900
MRS

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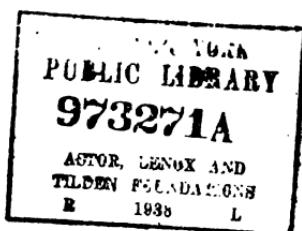


BOSTON
Richard G. Badger & Co.

1900
MRS

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TO
MY KINSWOMAN

SARAH GRAND

I DEDICATE
THIS LITTLE BOOK
THAT THEREBY

THOUGH IT BE WHOLLY WITHOUT MERIT OF MINE
IT SHALL NOT BE WITHOUT HONOUR

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FOREPIECE

**IN THE HOUSE
OF ARMED MEN**

CHAPTER I

Wherein a Quarrel chances by the Civic Pump

OUT of the haunted twilight of the past — the grey West Indian twilight — there shambles the short slouching thick-set figure of Boaz Bryan, shuffling along on bear-like feet — those heavy dragging ill-lifted feet that were the despair of the drill-sergeant — his long powerful arms swinging awkwardly at his sides, ape-like, as he went ; the great chest stooped forward in the white zouave jacket ; the shifty little bead-like eyes deep set below heavy projecting brows in his mahogany countenance ; the broad nose, aquiline in profile, and the long full-lipped mouth lost in a forked black beard — so bushy and so black that when he laughed the deep lazy laugh seemed to come out of the very midst of the beard. Swift to anger and armed with a knife in one of those great hands, Boaz Bryan would have been a terrible adversary in a quarrel ; but discreet Nature, distributing her gifts mercifully, had dowered him with the gentleness of a woman. He detested a quarrel and was beloved of small children ; yet, except of his shrewish coal-black little

wife, he knew no fear — and he had considerable musical skill upon the fine-toothed comb.

He was one of the ugliest of men, and his uniform never fitted him ; the Government contractors had not calculated on the eccentricities of his formation ; and the master-tailor of the battalion, finding him outside the range of all preconceived governmental allowances of “let-out” and “take-in” for normal abnormalities, looked upon Bryan’s configuration as an insult to the traditions of his craft, and scorned to debase his calling by fitting with taste, so as to glorify, a work which the Creator Himself had seemed to have given up in disgust. As a result, in order to encircle his large girth, Boaz was always served out with a pair of baggy zouave breeches that were a world too long for him, and reached in consequence like blue sacks almost to the top of the white spats which covered his huge ungainly booted feet. But Boaz was well content enough — he loved a life of ease, and courted neglect.

Yet Boaz Bryan could rouse — at the sound of dice rattled in the leathern dice-box. Indeed, on the fall of the spotted cubes he would have staked all the vague possibilities of his immortal soul, could he have negotiated a loan.

Ay, *once*, on what he deemed a certainty, he trafficked his little black wife’s best patent-leather

boots — the ones with the white thread embroideries — pitting them against a complete suit of lady's underwear, and losing them to a sergeant of his company ; and there was a fine uproar and tearing of bonnets when Bryan's wife met the lady of the dice-favored sergeant wearing them.

It was in the old square of Port Royal on the evening of a great public holiday. Mrs. Bryan's jealous wandering eyes sighted her shoes on another woman : and it roused her gall. Her gorge rose. Clawing the air with outstretched eager hands, she fell upon the offending sergeant's lady. She tore the bonnet from the startled creature's head, flung it upon the dusty ground, spat upon it, and trampled it underfoot — snorting. Then she screamed, glaring at her ; leaped twice upon her feet ; rushed again at the bare dazed head ; gripped her ten fingers in the poor soul's bewildered wool, and hauled her, helpless and whimpering, round the disused well in several circles, whooping like one bereft.

And no man dared to interfere.

CHAPTER II

Concerning Boaz Bryan's family Timepiece

LATE that evening Boaz Bryan tapped at my door. He stealthily entered the great shadow beyond my shaded lamp, carrying in his arms a cheap tawdry wooden clock. He carried it in such an awkward way that, at every step he took, the pendulum thumped loudly against the thin woodwork of the veneered mahogany case.

He closed my door cautiously; then, turning round in the deep shadow of the room, he faced me, and, putting his heels together, saluted. His white jacket gleamed in the darkness.

“I ax yo’r pardon, cap’n,” said he, and hesitated, in some embarrassment. He passed his huge right hand across his forehead and down over his eyes, swept the heavy sweat off his face and beard, and wiped his drenched palm on the flank of his breeches. “I ax yo’r pardon, cap’n; but I is come to ax yo’, sah, whedder yo’ is agree’ble to allow me to leave dis here timepiece for yo’ to custody on yo’r premises for a li’l while — jest fo’

to-morrow — or peradventure till de day arter
to-morrow."

He came forward out of the gloom into the lamplight, put the clock down tenderly on my table, ran a very dirty handkerchief over it with caressing care, opened the painted glass door with clumsy fingers, and flipped the pendulum into motion. He listened with serious face, his head on one side, until the rattle and thwank of the pendulum gave way to a normal healthy tick, then he shut the little painted glass door, took four paces backwards into the shadow of the room, brought his heels together, and continued : —

"It are dis here way, sah. Mrs. Boaz Bryan she done catch'd de bad humors — and when Mrs. Boaz Bryan she done catch de bad humors *bad*, sah, it kind o' gits into she's wool to get flingin' de furniture around de house and layin' out for de chinaware, and emptyin' de premises through de windows on to de street." He coughed. "God-a-mighty know, sah, I'se not the person to blame she — I makes no complaints. Yo' unnerstand, cap'n, it are just de way de bad humors takes Deborah Bryan — it seem to bring she de kind o' gineral satisfaction dat permiscuous swearin' brings to de likes o' you and me, cap'n, and to de adjootant o' dis battalion. It are de Lord's will, sah." He sighed. "God in He's own good pur-

pose done order'd dese things dis-a-way, cap'n, and I isn't goin' to sot down and question de ways o' Providence. . . . Nevertheless, dis evenin' I reckon I kind o' got in ahind o' Providence wid dis here timepiece."

I nodded, to show him that I grasped the position, and considered the subject closed. He waited in silence, and, it seemed to me, anxiously for a reply.

"All right, Bryan, all right. Leave it there — on the table," said I.

Boaz Bryan looked relieved, sighed heavily with satisfaction, and, saluting solemnly amongst the shadows, stole with fearful stealthy step out of the room. . . . I thought I heard him slap his leg and chuckle, as he slowly descended the stairs. . . .

Upon my table the crude machinery ticked sepulchrally. It was a morbid hollow-chested engine, that told without gaiety the passage of time, a thing incapable of joyousness as a hearse-horse — or a minor poet.

After three days Boaz Bryan came for the clock. He came at night, with the same mysterious rites as before; but as he fell up my stairs with clumsy tread, and, on reaching the top, turned and had a heated and angry altercation with my shrewish old woman-servant down in the passage

below, the assumption of mystery was pure poetry on his part.

“If yo’ wasn’t a lady, I’d call yo’ a blasted liar!” he bawled down the stair.

Then he knocked lightly at my door; entered the room on careful feet; shut the door again noiselessly; bent down to see that the catch held; and, turning to me, straightened himself in the gloom, put his heels together, and saluted.

“Beg pardon, cap’n,” said he in his deep growl.

“Well, Bryan?”

“I is afeer’d I has ax’d yo’ to custody de ole timepiece a mighty long time for me on dis partic’lar occasion, cap’n; but”—he shifted uneasily—“de facts o’ de case is like dis here, sah.” He hesitated, and gave a nervous laugh. “De ole gal she’s been on de rampajious high-strikes most o’ de time—and when she’s not been rampajin’ she’s been glarin’ and solemn, worse dan rampajin’.” He sighed wearily. “She appears like she done got dese here feelin’s sottled on to she kind o’ continuous on dis occasion, sah—dat a fact. No use hidin’ up facts—facts gits into de wind, and de wind spreads dem out over de whole town like de small-pox. Nevertheless, I hopes de ole timepiece it don’t been givin’ yo’ too much trouble, sah.”

“Not at all, Bryan, not at all,” said I, and

added, in an unretrievable moment of flippant vulgarity, "it has added brightness to the surrounding scenery."

"Yes, sah," said Bryan, with glowing pride, "it are a mighty pooty thing, dat machine—ain't dat so, cap'n? A mighty pooty affair. Dat dar timepiece, sah, it are a luxury—no mistake 'bout dat. De jew'ly feller he allows dat dar timepiece are a luxury—he says to me, says he, de third time I tak'd de affair to he last month, says he: 'Mr. Boaz Bryan,' says he, 'dis here kind o' timepieces is a luxury,' says he, 'and you has got to pay for luxuries.' I reckon dat jeweller feller he known'd a luxury when he see'd one. Dat timepiece, sah, it are a wunnerful piece o' mechanical circumnavigation—dat dar's what de schoolmaster calls it—it only requires windin' up once in de day, most o' de time, sah—exceppin' sometimes when de pundulum kind o' gits mixed up wid de insides o' de bowels o' de machine. Dose times when de pundulum gits jack'd up wid de innards o' de machinery, I jest slaps a consider'ble amount o' hair-grease into de keyhole dat winds de big hand, and den I lights some o' dem wax matches unnerneath de works so's to melt de grease. Den sometimes de pundulum it gits to swingin' again in de gineral order o' things—sometimes it don't git to swingin'—it's de Lord's

will. Dose times when dat happens so—dose times when de ole affair seems like it done got kind o' tired o' things, den I has to git off wid it to de jew'lry feller across de harbor. . . . Dar was one time I recollek' when I was turnin' de key of de works de ole machine done went off—blop! burrh!—kind o' sudden, like it done been on de stoopenjous drink and got a monstrous hiccup. . . . I done wagged de pundulum"—he shook his head. "No good. Seemed to 'a sottled down for hospital. Appeared to gone sick, like it done got de bilious symptoms. . . . When I took'd it along to de jew'lry feller, he tell'd me de mainspring done busted. Huh!" He scratched his head. "I see'd things is mighty serious wid dat timepiece—I see'd I isn't goin' to git de job done cheap—I see'd I is goin' to git no satisfaction in callin' de feller a liar and tellin' he I wasn't born de week befo' last—I see'd nothin' ain't goin' to bring down de bargain, so I says, wid de big style, says I, 'All right, ole man,' says I, 'go ahead,' says I, 'de timepiece done gone sick, dat all—yo' has got to git de thing purgated,' says I. Wid dat, he opened de affair and he pulled a piece of coil out o' de innards of de ole character de length of—I reckon," said he, looking into space with one eye half shut to gauge his calculation—"I reckon de innards o' dat timepiece was de length o' de bowels of a Cochin-China hen—"

"Yes, yes, Bryan. You may take it away."

"Yes, sah — thank yo', sah." He came forward with cheerful clumsiness to take the clock, and, shaking out a soiled handkerchief, he carefully put it over the top to protect it against the night air.

"But, Bryan," said I, "what brings you at this time of night for the clock?"

"Dat's it, sah, dat's it," he said in a hushed, confidential voice. He looked cautiously over his shoulder. "Well, cap'n, I think'd when it done git to sundown dis artennoon dat de ole girl she was never goin' to git over dis here last stroke o' rampajiousness. . . . Yo' unnerstand, sah, she's been jabberin' and layin' down she's sentiments dis long time agin de sin o' playin' wid cards and dicin'. I ax'd she what-for de Almighty done give'd we cards and dice for exceppin' for playin' cards and dicin'; but she allers give'd a snort, and say'd dese things is again religion. She sort o' got fixed onto dat. I has ginerally notice, cap'n, dese here bust-ups of Deborah Bryan's dey allers lasts de longest and is de most cantakerous when Deborah Bryan gits sottild down on to de responsibilities of original sin and gives way to she's bad feelin's and uncharitableness on account of religious points of argiment. Dat gives she de confidence dat de Lord are on she's side. . . . Mind

yo', cap'n, I is not de man to complain — God forbid! but dey is lengths *and* lengths. Sho!" He spluttered in disgust — then a merry gleam slipped into his cunning little eyes. "But it war ole man Scannells dat done take'd de trick, sah; it war ole man Scannells, he sottled de business. . . ." He laughed a low chuckling laugh. "Dis evenin' I done been wid de ole girl to a civilian tea-party round at Scannells, jest outside de gates, sah. Yes, sah, I reckon it war ole man Scannells dat done it. . . . Arter de vittles was took'd offen of de table, Scannells he says, says he, 'Mrs. Boaz Bryan,' says he, 'may I have de pleasure o' de honor of a game of Napoleon wid yo'?' says he. 'Wid de greatest o' pleasure, Mr. Scannells,' says she. And Scannells he giv'd she he's arm, and led she out quiet and calm like she was a mule on a halter; and she done take'd a hand *shesself* wid de cards dis evenin', cap'n"—Boaz Bryan's little shifty eyes twinkled—"and dey done sottled down to dese here sinful games o' chance." He chuckled. "Yo' unnerstand, sah; she are *winnin'* most o' de time—winnin' like she was de Lord's anointed. . . . De next thing I know'd, she was gittin' kind o' friendly—and den she done called me Boaz, sort o' in de ordinary way of circumstances. And wid dat, Scannells he wink'd to me, solemn. And I

think'd, thinks I, de ole gal she's got a sort o' peaceful look on to she; it are jist about time dat I ought to git prancin' back to de cap'n and gettin' de ole timepiece out o' store — t'otherwise peradventure she done most likely come home and miss de ole affair offen of de parlor table, den peradventure she's remembrance it done likely enough git goin' back on circumstances." He shifted uneasily on his feet, passed his hand over his mouth, and scratched the back of his head. "It seem'd like it might be sort o' onfortunate, cap'n, if she done git goin' back on things — so I dropped in, sah, to ax yo' for de loan back o' de ole piece o' furniture."

I nodded.

He lifted up the clock, tucked it under his arm, and moved towards the door. There he hesitated, turned round, and asked, somewhat shamefacedly, but with evident anxiety :

"Cap'n — supposin' de luck done changed agin Deborah Bryan when I gits back to ole man Scannells! — peradventure yo' is goin' to allow me to bring back de timepiece here for yo' to custody agin dis evenin', sah?"

"Well, yes, Bryan. But why should the luck turn so suddenly?"

Boaz Bryan sighed.

"It aren't exactly sudden, cap'n. Dat a fact.

It are a matter o' gittin' on for two or three hours."

"Oh?" queried I.

"Yes, sah; it are dis way, sah"—he hesitated; and added bashfully—"on de way to dis place, cap'n, I done met up along wid a lady dat I has de pleasure o' de acquaintance wid — and — I done git to talkin' sass wid she — and such — and — I is afear'd de luck done got de time to cool, and gone agin de ole gal in de between-whiles."

I coughed.

"Fie! Bryan, fie!" said I.

Boaz Bryan shifted his feet and laughed uneasily,—a very joyless laugh. The situation was too tense for jesting. He hitched the clock closer under his left arm.

"Thank yo', cap'n, for de condescension ob takin' de custody o' de ole timepiece," he said; then added absently: "Good-night, cap'n!"

He saluted, turned, and silently and mysteriously let himself out of the room. I could hear him creep slowly down the stairs, a step at a time, as though he feared to wake the gossips. . . .

There was a tap at my door, and my old black woman-butler entered. Said she:

"I has kep' my eye on dat dar Boaz Bryan from

24 Boaz Bryan's Family Timepiece

de time he done crep' into dis house, sah, to de time he done left it. . . . Huh!" She stood with her arms akimbo and gazed at me, a curl on her lip. "Huh! I guess dey is blamed miracles happenin' around dis town dis evenin'. . . . Boaz Bryan — and he's had a heap o' chances, dey is dat excuse for he, sho' 'nuff — Boaz Bryan he's kep' he's hands from pickin' and stealin'. Dar are somethin' solemn goin' to happen."

I gathered from the sarcastic tone of the remark that I was being obliquely chidden. And I bowed and accepted the blame.

CHAPTER III

Wherein a little Child prays for Boaz Bryan

ON Boaz Bryan the effect of punishment was scarcely chastening, for it only sharpened his wits in eluding the just penalties of his weaknesses.

A series of almost childish misdemeanors at last inflamed me into giving him a sharper lesson than usual. Brought to judgment, Boaz Bryan stood there before me in awkward discomfort, maintaining a discreet silence, and by a shrewd exercise of masterly inactivity throwing the full burden of proof upon his accusers. And it must be confessed that their vehement and bitter contradictions of each other's statements against Boaz, in order to work off private grudges against one another, made it a difficult task to pick out that part of the story which might contain some shreds of the truth—in which quest after justice Boaz Bryan's attitude helped but little, for he gave no hint, showed no trace of feeling, and bore himself during the recital of his achievements with becoming modesty. It was only when one of the witnesses, more virulent than the rest, told a vicious lie against him that a black scowl darkly gathered over the little rest-

less eyes—and I should have been sorry to have been that man when Boaz Bryan met him on the sands at night and alone. Otherwise, he stood there silently, the great chest stooped forward, the long arms hanging by his sides, the huge hands nervously fingering the yellow piping in the side-seams of his baggy blue breeches, a sentry at his side—and he spake no word. The little shifty eyes, out of their dark sockets, watched each witness furtively—the rest of him, the motives of his acts, the record of his culpability, the possibility of his innocence, lay masked and mute behind the forked black beard that hid the tell-tale shades of feeling which may have flitted across the greater part of his countenance. . . .

He took his punishment grimly and in silence; and he tramped out of the orderly-room in step with his escort at the sharp order of the sergeant-major without a sign of adverse feeling against me, his judge. . . .

But he spent the intervals between the nagging and irritating defaulter drills that day (the dreary trudges with his pack on his back which chiefly constituted the afternoon of his days of expiation during his enforced detention in barracks) in playing at horses with my five-year-old youngster. He demeaned himself to the province of a common circus, adapted his clumsy body to the rôle

of a hobby-horse, and pranced and curvetted in ungainly gambols up and down the gravelled court behind the married soldiers' quarters; the little fellow on his shoulders in a wild ecstasy of delight the while, with his two small white hands gripped in the bushy wool of Bryan's black beard. And they mingled trebled crowing merriment and deep guttural guffaws till the place seemed a-chuckle with their laughter.

Towards sunset, at the first sign of fatigue in the child, Boaz Bryan brought him home. He put him down on my back-doorstep; knelt down and smoothed out the little breeches and rumpled tuckers, and, taking off his own fez, with it wiped the dust off the little shoes. Then, putting on his fez again, he stood up and solemnly saluted the child with the military salute; and the child put his little heels together and as solemnly returned the salute, adding, with grave formality :

“Good evening, Private Boaz Bryan.”

To which the man answered :

“Good evenin', sah !”

And smiling, he turned and walked back to the men's quarters, where the defaulters were already falling in.

As the little fellow got into his absurd little bed that night he knelt on the coverlet and said his

28 A little Child prays for Boaz Bryan

prayers for the good estate of his mother and father, of two uncles, a great-aunt, his governess, and the servants each by name; and he put in a word for two small boys whom he had recently met at a picnic. Then he hesitated, and his little brows puckered as over some disquieting religious problem. (I was somewhat nervous of his religious problems — they generally ended in making either his God or his father ridiculous.)

“ I needn’t pray for Mrs. Boaz, need I, father ? ” he asked.

“ Why, my son ? ”

“ Oh, she’s in the choir, so *she’s* all right — and I don’t like her. Need I, father ? ”

“ Er — no ; I don’t think you need, my boy.”

“ Oh, then I won’t,” said he.

“ Boaz Bryan will pray for her,” said I, improving the occasion.

He looked at me with large inquiring eyes. “ I wonder,” said he.

He resumed his prayers and finished by asking that the kindness of Heaven might descend upon Private Boaz Bryan ; “ for ” — said he to me in a confidential aside from his communion with his Maker — “ Boaz Bryan’s a real gentleman.”

And I did not deny it.

**AT HUCKLEBACK'S
LODGING-HOUSE**

CHAPTER IV

Wherein Huckleback's Lamps are not Lit

A SMOKY twilight enveloped Kingston, across the harbour, and held house and spire, wharf and mast, in a vague world of dreams, and whelmed in further mystery the looming shadowy forms of mountains in the miles beyond.

The lower quarter of the town, about the wharves, was deserted, lulled in the stillness of the later dusk, peaceful in the drowsy hush of the coming shadow of the night. The shops and stores were long since closed for the day; and the dwellers in the town, as their custom is, had put up their shutters; and were gone to take their evening airing, following the human stream which since before the setting of the sun had been flowing to the public gardens, parks, and playing-fields, on the outskirts of the town; the citizens were only now in the dusk beginning to turn their steps homewards along the main thoroughfares of the suburbs, filling the town-bound tinkling tram-cars that ground along the metal rails, or crowding to overflowing the lighted wayside grog-shops as

they cheerily trudged back to their houses on foot. The amber light of the later afternoon had long ago given way to the blood-stained glories of a sullen sunset, and the sunset with mighty mass of embattled clouds had burnt away in flames of fire, and had in turn smouldered and gone out beyond the margin of the world, and sunk into the all-embracing gray of the universal twilight; and now the sable curtain of the coming night was being drawn across the darkening window of the heavens; but the sound of the returning people had not yet begun to reach the lower town nor to awaken the echoes of its musty ways.

In the frowsy street that contained Huckleback's lodging-house there was but little sign of life. The lighted lamps in the road were beginning to tell as splashes of lemon flame, and to cast faint shadows upon the roadway. A couple of silent-footed goats slowly moved ghostlike about the grass-grown runnels, nibbling scant dyspeptic nourishment from the weedy margin of the thoroughfare. A rum-shop here and there was being lighted up, but these were empty as yet of their lounging groups of regular frequenters, habitual gossips, and cackling laughing women; and their owners, seated on back-tilted chairs, were dangling aimless feet, kicking their heels idly in the tedious do-nothing time which precedes entertainment—

the dragging hour before the guests begin to arrive. In one dram-shop a drunken fellow, from a merchantman that lay in the harbour, quaveringly sang a sea-song with windy whoops and hollas, and thumped a pewter pint-pot upon the bar-counter, beating sorry time to his bungling minstrelsy. But it was a weakly attempt at rollicking debauchery : his little remaining force he needed to nurse for the glory of his long-sustained upper notes — his chief source of pride — and his noisy humour was slowly oozing from him. Your singing sot sings but a heartless lilt without a friendly chorus ; and this fellow had only a small and unappreciative audience. It was telling on his spirits. He had nearly exhausted the enthusiasm of dissipation, and a heavy drowsiness was settling upon him. He was now babbling to sleep. He soon fell mostly to mumbling in his singing, and his beats upon the counter were growing rarer. His only companion lay in one corner, all of a heap, in a pool of gin and water, snoring grossly, his will gone from him. The rumshop-keeper himself had not so far caught the contagion of debauch, so the garulous drunken rogue sang alone, and somewhat palsily. He had long since sucked his tankard dry, but from force of habit and a will to be more drunken he would ever and again set the brim of the drinking vessel to his mouth and suck imag-

inary dregs, soliloquising upon the hollowness of emptiness, and hiccupping unappreciated blasphemies into the echoing bottom of his solitary pewter pot—for empty pockets forbade the further perfecting of his drunkenness.

Down the road, Huckleback's rum-store remained unlit.

For the rest—twilight; a mighty hush; from drowsy nature scarce a sound.

Melissa's girlish figure flitted down the street. Her light creole walk was the lighter for her being barefooted. Her comely brown face was anxious—anxious as were her timid eyes. She stopped outside Huckleback's deserted rum-store—stopped—then of a sudden reeled against the wall, clutching at it to prevent herself from falling, stricken with strangling terror. She would have cried out, but checked herself. Before the door, in the deep dusk, the ape-like filthy-looking figure of a foul old negro in rags and tatters was jiggling on silent feet, with bendings of the knee and wavings of his arms, mumbling an incantation in some strange tongue.

He smiled evilly at the startled woman, and held out a threatening arm over the house. “Death!—death!—death!—de swift death!” he barked, and in the saying of it passed away with a leer into the dusk.

Melissa, her hand at her throat, ran to the doorstep as a mother might rush to save a child; stooped down; and in the uncertain light groped about under the woodwork for an evil spell. Her hand could find nothing. But as her anxious eyes grew used to the light she saw a dark something upon the step. A stifled cry left her lips; a great dread came upon her; she tottered forward on her knees, swooning — grasped the step — steadied herself. Clutching at her breasts, and, rising with an effort, she caught at the doorpost, leaning against it until her nerve returned. . . . A little miniature wooden coffin lay on the step, and fouled the air with the sour smell of the dead.

“Gahd!” she whispered.

The death token was upon the house of the lodging-house-keeper Huckleback. . . .

There was a sob in the rum-store. Melissa glanced cautiously up and down the street and listened. She put her finger on her lip hesitatingly.

“It are kind o’ skeery here,” she said; and added fearfully, “De whole place seem like it done kind o’ grown old — de ole place dat was de most cheerfulness rum-store in Jamayaca!”

She turned to the open neglected grog-shop which, in a couple of long shallow steps, gave on to the sidewalk without door or shutter or any

other barrier between its deeper gloom and the gathering gloom outside — its glasses and bottles of liquors dimly seen where they were set out on the roughly carpentered bar-counter and on the shelves close behind the counter, untended, and inviting only wandering Theft to slake its thirst.

“ I was always lighted up de first in dis street when I was wid Huckleback,” she said with a sigh. “ De old man he always liked it so.”

She stepped cautiously into the gloom of the open grog-shop, and, standing on tip-toe at the door by the end of the counter, she peeped through the square upper panel, which was of glass, and over the low muslin curtain on the other side of the glass into the dark common-room of the lodging-house within. Then she opened the door very quietly, went in stealthily, and softly closed it after her.

In the deep gloom of the darkening twilight, on a rude bench in the middle of the bare deserted common-room of his lodging-house, sat the sallow mulatto trader Huckleback, unkempt and in his shirt-sleeves. He held his bowed head between his hands, and once he sobbed.

Melissa Haplass leaned against the door, timidly hesitating for a moment — then she tripped on tip-toe to the man’s side, dropped on her knees beside him, and kissed his head.

There was a long pause.

"I hear'd yo' come in, M'lissa, ole gal!" he said, without looking up, "for all yo' slipped in so craftily. But yo' was always soft and gentle—yo' was always a good woman to me. Perhaps it 'ud be better for yo' if you'd been a blamed brute de same like dis here Jezebel."

A tear dropped upon her upturned face. She threw her arms about his neck, and put her face against his.

"I has been wonderin' all dis day," she crooned, "if dey — as ought to — is lookin' arter my man Huckleback. I has been wonderin' if de lamps is trimmed in de rum-store agin de comin' o' nightfall like dey was always trimmed in de ole days. I has been wonderin' if *she* trims dem wid she's own hands — other folks never trims a person's lamps wid satisfaction. I has been wonderin' if Huckleback gits wash'd up and takes he's lawful wedded wife out regular in the sundown or de 'tween-lights for a breeze. I has been wonderin' whedder de remembrance of Melissa takin' she's walks wid he ever comes to Huckleback when de sun gits down. I has been wonderin' if de remembrance of Melissa Haplass comes between Huckleback and dis woman — when he's walkin' along aside of she. I has been wonderin' if things ginnerally is sot out correct

and proper in de lodgin'-house for de ole man, so dat he can stand in de outside rum-store proud and content wid heself, like he was a man o' propertee wid a heap of other folks to do he's work for he, and pass de time o' day wid authority to de neighbours like he done got de right to give he's opinion. I has been wonderin'"—she stopped and wiped away a tear—"I has been wonderin' whedder ole friend Huckleback done forgot de gal dey calls Melissa Haplass altogedder."

The man sobbed.

Melissa folded her hands across his knee, sank down, sitting there on the floor at his feet, and said dreamily, "I was lookin' at de sky dis sun-down, thinkin' of de ole time me and Huckleback was used to fernander around and git the air—and suddenlike I think'd I hear'd yo' call 'Melissa!'"—and I riz up and come."

He bent down and put his cheek against her forehead.

"I has no honour since de time yo' left me, Melissa—no honour at all," said he drearily. "Jezebel, she's been trailin' around de town in she's ball-clothes dis two days wid de English sailor dey calls Anak Streke. Dis woman she fouls me nest like she was a buzzard—and de neighbours dey gits into de corners and snigger and giggle at she's carryin's-on. Ole friends dat

was used to give me honour dey has forgotted all about me dignity: I is become de husband o' Jezebel Pettyfer — dat all. And de wife sheself — she has more pleasure in de company of any man exceppin' me. One time I was rich — wid Melissa Haplass; and I didn't done know it. But I don't got de right to complain. I done it all me own self — and I done it all wrong. I is de laughin' stock o' de whole town."

"It all been a big mistake, Huckleback, ole man — all a big mistake. You has made your bed — and yo' has made mine — and I don't got only troubled sleep most o' de time."

She sighed wearily.

The man sobbed heavily, and his tears fell upon her face.

Suddenly he stopped and listened. He put his hand upon her shoulder.

"Git along, Melissa, ole gal," said he, rousing with sudden nervousness, "git along. She may be comin' back dis any time — and she bound to damage yo' for sartin sure if she catch yo' round here."

Melissa Haplass did not stir.

"No fear o' dat, Hucklebuck, no fear o' dat." She laughed bitterly. "I has just seen she walkin' around de town wid de white sailor feller, Anak Streke."

Huckleback put his head in his hands again.

"I has sent my man for he's walk," he said. "Dere is times a man's bound to chew his miseries alone wid heself. De fellow gived me he's lip de day befo' yestidday—so I calc'late Jezebel she's been carryin' on wid *he* likewise. . . . He writes po'try."

There was a long pause.

Melissa stroked his head.

"It are gone nearly twelve months," said she, and sighed, "since I throw'd me shadow in dis house, Huckleback—a whole twelve months; and it seems like it was years. Dyle he's been a good friend to me—but he are only Dyle; he don't got de ways I was used to; second-hand clothes dey has never de same freshness like new clothes—always appear like dar was de shape of other folks about dem. I don't lost de remembrance o' my ole man Huckleback."

"I is tired o' dis here Jezebel woman," said Huckleback, with sudden anger; "sick and tired o' she. . . . I has sottded it. . . . I is goin' to sell dis here place, and take yo' wid me to Panama, Melissa—and we's goin' to start fresh again."

Melissa put her hand on his mouth and listened.

Footsteps passed the door, and the chatter of voices passed down the street. They could hear Huckleback's potman come into the grog-shop outside. He was searching for a light.

Melissa started to her feet, gripped her hand to her frightened heart, and made for the grog-shop door.

Huckleback leaped up.

"Not dat way, Melissa," he whispered hoarsely : "for de love of God, not dat way. Dis door here into de side-street — quick ! Meet me to-night in de ole place — by de gate o' de buryin'-ground — at de place where dey brings de dead folks through."

She ran up to him, and kissed him upon the mouth, then, whimpering like a frightened child, kissed him again ; she ran swiftly to the door, slipped out into the side-street, and was gone.

The sailors' quarter had begun to wake up for the night.

And Huckleback's lamps were not yet lit.

CHAPTER V

Wherein Huckleback's Lamps are Lit

NIGHT was now upon the town, and Huckleback's lodging-house roared garrulously with local arguments. The brightly-lighted grog-shop shone yellow into the dark roadway; and out of the midst of the blaze of golden light came the cackle of friendly disputations, tag-ends of genial sarcasms, and echoes of jocose retorts, with the plaintive cachinnation of negro laughter. From behind the ramshackle bar, Huckleback's coloured potman—in his shirt-sleeves, and gripping a cigar between his teeth on one side of his mouth to facilitate his joining in the repartee out of the other—served liquors to a group of chattering gesticulating negro folk, who, in gossiping mood, stood lounging against the counter. On the long shallow wooden steps that gave from the rickety floor on to the street sat half-a-dozen old negro cronies in a solemn row, with their large-booted feet on the sidewalk and their tumblers on the boards beside them. One old black fellow lolled in a broken chair, back-tilted against the narrow wall; he held a

tankard upon his knee, closely following the points of the scandals and guffawing at the frequent sallies. They were all smoking, and the smoke rose upwards to the dingy roof and clouded into fog amongst the rafters. A wall-lamp hung against the bottle-laden shelves behind the potman, and the flare from its silvered reflector glittered amongst the bottles at either side, played upon the top of the wet counter, flecked with splashes of light the glasses and pewter tankards which lay upon it, and threw a blaze of magnificence about the potman. Where the light did not fall were great shadows; and glittering bottles and glasses gleamed amongst the shadows. In the street the passer-by, as his upturned face came into the light, blinked at the sudden glare; and his nostrils caught the inviting scent of spirituous liquors, the bitter stench of burning oil, and the pungent fragrance of smouldering tobacco. Along the bar-counter against the illumined room the restless lounging folk were blackly silhouetted like the shifting figures in a shadow-show.

The place had been a-roar for a couple of hours; and now the loungers at the bar were beginning to show signs of leaving, as the time neared for closing. They were gathering into little knots to say their good-nights, and the wags amongst them were cudgelling their wits to invent

their last facetious sallies before they left, reviving ancient railleries. . . . And so, with vigorous hand-shakings and jocose slappings on the back, one after another was drifting away into the night.

At the end of the grog-shop the glass door which led into the common-room swung open — out of its yawning gape an old negro stepped into the bar — there was a gust of noisy laughter and buzz of conversation from within — and the door swung to again with a slam. The old negro nodded to the potman, cried a cheery good-night to the loungers about the bar, and passed out into the blackness of the street. . . . A harsh scolding negress's voice greeted him out of the dark with complainings and shrill upbraiding ; and he, with the air of one having legitimate authority, masterfully bade her to be damned. . . .

Huckleback's potman himself felt that the end of the evening was at hand, for his work was slackening down, and he now occasionally washed the used glasses before filling them for the very rare new-comers ; indeed, he was beginning to rinse out some of the stemmed tumblers and was putting them to drain, bowls down, in little ranks upon the counter, as good-nights were becoming the order of the evening, and the coloured folk were thinning off to their homes. The near promise of closing time brought a smile to the mouth

of Huckleback's potman, so that the bright reflector of the wall-lamp behind him, which shone round about his woolly pate and encircled it in a halo of golden glory, displayed his radiant face like the face of a jocund black apostle. . . .

Huckleback pulled open the glass door that led from the common-room into the now almost empty grog-shop, and, lolling against it, fixed it with his shoulder to the wall. He nodded to the few loiterers at the dingy counter, thrust his hands into his trousers' pockets, and stood staring absently into the night. His eyes were heavy with drink, his lips red and puffy, and his sallow skin very pale. Through the open door the hoarse mutter from the common-room behind him buzzed in his ears with frequent gusts of cackling creole laughter.

Huckleback had been moody all day—they said. He had begun the evening, however, in unwonted good spirits, so that some of his old friends had gossiped in each other's ears that the cheery Huckleback of other days was come back amongst them again. Indeed, a couple or so had grown seriously drunk over their satisfaction and the general strangeness of things, wetting their wise saws and threadbare sayings with too frequent punctuation of bemuddling drams. . . . But Huckleback's cheeriness had gradually flickered out as the even-

ing wore on. He had foregone his usual habit and had been drinking with his customers — more than once he had drunk the strong liquor he sold to the soldiery — nay, had even descended to the rank maddening poison he kept for the sterner palates of the sailors ; and though he had not drunk overmuch, the heating fumes of his potations had fired his brain, and by the middle of the evening he had shown an unpleasant readiness to enter into quarrels. Later on he had become sullen, mute, and preoccupied. He had occasionally roused himself for a while and shown a feverish anxiety for the coming of midnight, but a heavy-eyed silence was now fallen upon him.

So Huckleback leaned against the open door and gazed pensively into the night. He would exchange an absent-minded greeting with old friends as they passed out from the common-room on their way homewards, and then fall back upon his mood again. . . .

“ Evenin’, Huckleback, evenin’ ! ” snapped Absalom Stakkerpipe, the little church organist, as he tripped past him with jerky short step. The weakly little copper-coloured man, as he spoke cast a nervous glance backwards over his shoulder into the room he was hurriedly leaving ; his big robust wife had just entered the common-room through the door from the side-street, and was

peering about for him grimly, but vainly, with eyes as yet unaccustomed to the light. The little man, slipping out of the grog-shop door, wagged his head with feigned cheerfulness to Huckleback, who nodded without moving his gaze off his thoughts, his unseeing eyes pensively following the fussy little man as he skipped anxiously into the dark.

The noisy din in the common-room behind Huckleback ceased. From amongst the vague dark human shadows that loomed in the dim light Boaz Bryan's deep voice said :

“ Evenin', Mrs. Stakkerpipe, evenin'! I guess yo' is gittin' an app'intment here wid little Absolom. If dat so, den he's broken his word — he not here — he not here at all.”

Mrs. Stakkerpipe snorted.

Boaz Bryan coughed :

“ Peradventure,” said he, “ peradventure yo' hasn't been down to de church to see whedder Absolom's sottled down to practisin' dem new hymn tunes ? ”

A snigger ran round the room.

Mrs. Stakkerpipe sniffed, turned on her heels, and walked out of the door.

“ I reckon,” said Boaz Bryan when she was gone, “ I reckon sister Stakkerpipe she's gone off home to teach li'l Absolom de first commandment — thou shalt have none other gods but me.”

The bachelors tittered. . . .

The long dingy common-room glowed with a deep mellow light, where it was not possessed by great shadows, and all the place resounded with a garrulous din. Upon the heavy air hung the pungent reek of rank tobacco, mingled with the fragrant scent of rum and spirits, and tainted with the sour smell of negroes.

At the end of the long room nearest the grog-shop a number of coloured people were seated, gossiping; and at the open door Huckleback stood with his back towards them. From an ill-trimmed oil-lamp, which was fastened to the wall high above the panel, the tawny light strove to melt the gloom and glowed down upon the perspiring black folk below. Under the lamp a striking-clock ticked aggressively, grimly calling attention to the cheerful text pinned below it — *Eat, drink, and be merry; for to-morrow you die.* The coloured folk sat scattered about on chairs and benches, chattering, disputing, and laughing; and they took long drinks at pewter mugs which they kept for the most part on the floor underneath their chairs. The dingy walls were bare of ornament except for a couple of crudely coloured prints which hung on either side of the panel: a robust portrait of the Heir to the Throne in the pose of a field-marshall, pendant — without intentional irony — to a pre-

sentment of a beautiful lady, undressed save for a gem in her hair, black stockings, and a cigarette, who, in some subtle allegory, represented the unparalleled high quality of "Haggerty's Tobacco," and on whom the prince with royal fortitude turned a broad and incorruptible back. Tobacconists would seem to have a keen relish for a fine leg on a woman — as publicans have a passionate love of royalty.

At the further end of the room, in its murkier depths, shone flames of the yellow light of candles where at several tables sat groups of men and women whose dim-lit figures cast sombre black shadows on the dingy walls.

A fusillade of quips and jests and comic taunts ran up and down and round about the room, and here and there a ponderous senseless oath burst out, and everywhere was the cackle and cry of noisy merriment.

There were tanned English and Yankee seamen from the ships, black soldiers in the white shell-jackets and baggy blue breeches of the zouave battalion at the camp, and a number of coloured people of the town; there were several comely brown women, tricked out in muslin fineries, gaudily overdressed; and a little swarthy Spaniard or so from the Spanish gunboats. Some of the groups were gambling and some were telling tales;

most were drinking. At one table an ugly murderous-looking fellow with a scar above his eyes told a monstrous lie, but the others scoffed ; and he, to enhance the splendour of the lie, nailed it to the board with fist-banged oaths and thunderous blasphemies. But for all his bellowing none believed him ; for, said a great hairy boatswain, not without a touch of pride at the splendour of marine mendacity, he came from the sea and they came from the sea — whereat they all guffawed jovially. At another table a small group were playing with a dirty pack of cards. From yet another came the dull rattle of dice bumped in leather dice-boxes. And the men from the sea spat wondrously, and swore they also royally, like men who had an hereditary right to blaspheme and have no fear to take the name of the Lord their God in vain.

At the table where they played cards a gaudily-dressed negress sat on the knee of a burly English sailor and was shrilly singing a fragment of a sea-ditty somewhat drunkenly ; two other bedizened women, seated near, screamed with derisive laughter. The sailor grinned good-humouredly, changed his clay pipe to the other side of his mouth, and, sucking at it pensively, chose about from amongst the cards he held in his hand — flung down the winning card with a flourish — laughed — and

slapped the table jocosely with his great open palm, so that the glasses and pewters leaped and clinked. The players all threw down their cards and thrust them towards the middle of the table. The woman that sat on the sailor's knee stopped her sorry singing, leaned forward over the table, and awkwardly gathering up the winnings with uncertain fingers and solemn drunken difficulty, she put them into her pocket.

The sailor winked at the others.

“Jamaica Magdalene keeps her bloomin’ old slant eye open when winning’s in the wind, eh, mates?” said he bluffly.

A grin went round the table.

A black zouave sergeant gathered up the cards, shuffled them as the others put down their stakes, and began to deal.

The English sailor took his pipe out of his mouth, spat over his shoulder, and wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, set the pipe again between his teeth.

“Hold hard, old gal!” said he, tickling her ribs, “you ain’t staked for me—out with it! Chuck it out!—d’ye hear?” And he used a term of endearment that no gentleman should ever address towards a lady.

The woman leaned against him and kissed him; nestling up to him she lay with her head on his

chest, but took no further notice of his command. . . . The man laughed. He thrust his coarse fist into his trousers' pocket, pursed up his lips, and, after some considerable fumbling, brought out a couple of pence, which he flung on to the heap in the middle of the table. Then he picked up his hand of cards and clumsily thumbed through and arranged it, sucking at his pipe for inspiration.

The woman, nestling against him with her head on his shoulder, frowned solemnly with the drunkard's unfocussed eyes at the bobbing flame of the guttering candle.

The cards fell lightly on the table. . . .

The English sailor threw down his last card with a good-humoured oath.

“That dam well clears me out, Mag, old wench!” he cried. He put his arms round the woman and lifted her off his knee. Then he stood up, stretched himself, and stamped his feet to quicken his cramped legs. “Come along, boys!” he called to the other sailors, “the old trull won’t pay out any more o’ my misbegotten winnings, mates—and she’s got her blasted old teeth set for dirty weather.”

The men laughed. They flung their cards upon the table, and there was a general pushing back of chairs that scraped upon the floor.

“We must be makin’ for the old ship, boys,”

the burly fellow went on, knocking the ashes out of his pipe against the horny palm of his tarry hand, “and we’ve got to bring up Anak Streke yet — blast him ! He’s a tough one that to bring to, let alone hitchin’ on and gettin’ in tow, when he’s runnin’ free ; and the skipper swore as we’re weighin’ anchor at daybreak.”

The sailors rose, and there followed a general leave-taking between them and the black soldiery and the rest. They kissed all the women in the room amidst much squealing and tittering and horse-play. They kissed a married woman twice — once for herself and once for her husband — and, amidst cheery farewells and hearty good wishes, they lurched towards the grog-shop door with their women.

As they passed out, the boatswain slapped Huckleback upon the shoulder with a great hearty hand.

“Till we bloomin’ well meet again, Huckleback, old man !” said he ; “and when that’ll be, God Almighty only knows — and *He* ain’t over-certain.”

Huckleback nodded.

“A pot-belly, a long thirst, and the cork out o’ the rum-bottle !” cried the ship’s cook, who had a large eye for unessentials and flavourings.

“A hold like a ship’s tank — and gallons of

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beer!" sang out a 'prentice, with generous wish.
He it was that rolled the most in his gait and
always outbid the old ones, swore the most sense-
less oaths, spat the farthest, walked with the loudest
women, and pretended to be the most lost to
shame.

"Good luck!" and "God bless yer!" called
the others to the landlord as they passed out and
stepped into the street.

And Huckleback, his hands in his breeches'
pockets, nodded and nodded and nodded.

CHAPTER VI

Wherein Huckleback's Light goes Out

THERE was a shout of laughter, and applause, and a thumping of fists and rattle of pewter pots upon the tables. Boaz Bryan blushed with the self-complacency of a man who knows he has said a humourous thing.

They were seated, the last of them, in spasms of laughter about the grog-shop end of the room, where, after the departure of the sailors, they had gathered together for a last cackle before breaking up for the night. And Boaz Bryan sat in their midst.

“Hoo-hoo ! hyah-hyah ! Dat so. Ho-ho ! woick-ker-hee !” gurgled the gentlemen ; and “Ts-ss — te-hee !” tittered the ladies.

There was one stout old negro stamped his feet upon the floor in a tickled frenzy of exquisite delight, and another wagged his head from side to side, and they all cackled and crowed with merriment.

“Hee-hee ! Land o' Goshen ! holy gracious ! hoo-hoo !” they guffawed.

The ill-trimmed oil-lamp over the sliding panel

caused a bitter stench and flung down a great shadow to the floor, and the yellow light glowed upon their brown skins where they sat, casting little shadows about their eye-pits, and below their noses and full lips, and blacker shadows under their chins; and the seated figures melted into the dark shadows beneath and about them, as they cackled and cried with laughter.

“Hi! luddy-luddy!” squealed the ladies.

Boaz Bryan chuckled as he sat in the tawny gloom on a dilapidated chair. And they all bobbed and laughed and snickered and squealed.

“Luddy-luddy! Hee-hee! Ts-ss — te-hee!” spluttered the ladies.

They had drawn up their chairs about Boaz Bryan, so that the tables in the long room behind them were deserted, and all that part given up to the shadows and guttering candles except in the extreme furthermost corner of the room, where, almost in darkness, sat the sinister little old widow Tiffles, the mother of Deborah Bryan, crouching over a glass of strong spirits which she had collected from the leavings of the glasses about her. She sat mumbling to herself, her little wizened black face almost lost in the folds of a great black handkerchief.

Nicodemus Dredge, the lean pasty-faced schoolmaster sniggered.

"Mr. Bryan's observation," said he, "gits vergin' onto de confines of de obscene, exceptin' it's atoned for by being tempered wid de fascinatin' element of de ridiculous." And he giggled again demurely. Indeed, one scurrious coloured lady afterward averred that the schoolmaster hiccoughed.

"Hi! dat so," roared Long Burke, a gigantic black recruit, who had been sucking awkwardly at a cigar to keep it alight in a passive interval after a paralyzing fit of laughter, "dat so." He began to wheeze, feeling another spasm of laughter coming on, "D'clare to gracious, dat so. I reckon for a first-class obscene style dey isn't a feller in de whole town is fit to stand up agin Boaz Bryan;" he took his cigar out of his mouth, and blinked his eyes to clear them of the smarting smoke: "Bryan, he—" He could say no more; his mouth twitched, he slapped his thigh and spluttered into laughter. So he sat and shook his head, and gasped and squealed again. And the others laughed at his laughing.

There they sat chuckling and wheezing. There was Wilberforce Gumme, the coloured chemist, who laughed sniggeringly as became a man who sometimes read the lessons of a Sunday and understood prescriptions; Lazarus Goole, the stoop'd old negro sexton, who laughed demurely,

as became a man who in a manner associated with the clergy ; Nicodemus Dredge, the lean and pasty-faced schoolmaster, who tittered with taste as became a scholar and a pedant ; there were some white-jacketed zouave soldiers who roared boisterously, led by Long Burke, the big recruit, who laughed till he hiccupped, and wagged his head from side to side, and smote his baggy-breeches'd legs and hiccupped again ; and a coloured clerk or two, who held their black-waistcoated sides ; and flashily-dressed coloured women, who cackled with shrill cachinnation and dried their eyes with fancy handkerchiefs and cackled again, crying "Hi ! " and "God-a-mercy !" and "Dat's a most ondelicate man ! "

Boaz Bryan, grinning, put his great hand under his chair, fumbled about for his pewter, and, finding it, lifted it to his mouth, and gulped down the liquor to the bottom.

A comely negress in white muslin, who sat beside him, slapped him skittishly upon the arm as he drank.

"Yo' is a most ondecent feller, Boaz Bryan !" said she. Then she tittered again behind her heavily-scented handkerchief.

Boaz Bryan, with his head thrown back and his nose in the pewter pot, chuckled into its empty hollow :

“Thank God!” said he, “I was born on-decent!” And he bawled for another glass of “sugar-water”:

“And just rub de nose o’ de rum-bottle agin de glass—dat gives de liquor quality,” he said with a wink to Huckleback’s assistant, whose brown face appeared at the open panel. The potman grinned, with his cigar between his teeth, and concocted the drink.

He passed the stemmed glass on to the ledge.

A woman got up and brought the glass to Boaz Bryan, who wiped his mouth to kiss her—glanced round the room with peery little eyes—and seeing his wife’s mother, the distant widow Tiffles, he winked instead.

The woman laughed shrilly, stooped down, and gave him a sounding kiss.

“Give dat to Deborah Bryan from me!” she cried, and danced a step or two out of sheer deviltry. Boaz uttered a nervous laugh. A snigger went round the room. The woman skipped up to him, tickled at his embarrassment, and kissed him again. “And give dat to de old widow Tiffles,” she cried insolently; “de ole mudder-in-law she’ll like me sentiments better from yo’r lips dan from mine. De balance of what Deborah Bryan don’t want, yo’ can give to she’s female relations.”

They all guffawed vulgarly.

Boaz smiled a sickly smile, took the glass from her hand, put the liquor under his chair carefully, and, thrusting out his arm, pushed the woman down on to a chair beside him. A gloomy look settled upon his face, and his contribution to the horse-laugh that followed had little merriment in it.

The seated figures glanced furtively over their shoulders towards the far end of the room. Bryan wiped his forehead with a large coloured handkerchief which he hauled out of his capacious breeches' pocket, and sighed.

"Boaz Bryan!" invitingly queried the big recruit, feeling a diversion would relieve the tension of the situation, "yo' isn't goin' to sing 'De Gal wid de Buckle in She's Shoes' dis evenin'?"

Boaz Bryan pushed his great hands deep into the pockets of his baggy breeches, thrust out his legs in front of him, hunched up his shoulders, and looked at the big recruit under his brows.

"Dey ain't goin' to be no gals wid buckles in dey shoes, nor yet gals widout buckles in dey shoes, interjooced onto dese here premises dis evenin', thank yo, Private Burke," said he with biting distinctness; and the last relics of laughter simmered out. "Huh! it ain't in de reason o'

things to get to singin' comic music wid me stommick buzzin' wid symptoms like dey was skeery things and judgment-day worritin' around." And he spat.

"Huh, huh! oh yes—it feels like dey was thunder around; I done noticed dat," said the big recruit appealingly.

"Dey is worse things dan thunder around," said Boaz grimly; and gazed at the lamp. There was a long pause. . . . "Things is kind o' skeery dis evenin'. Even de rum at de bottom o' de glass don't altogether able to get de feelin's on to de cheerful side o' things. Huh-huh! things is jest *sottered down* to skeery." He gazed pensively at the lamp for some time from under his black projecting brows, and growled glumly: "No, sah; I don't got de singin' propensities on me just dis moment exactly. I don't got de laffin' and gigglin's on me. My ole woman she's been hearin' de death-watch tickin' in de wall. She's allers hearin' de death-watch tickin' in de wall; but dis time dis here partic'lar tickin' seems to done got onto me stommick, and done makin' me feel lonesome in me bowels. Yes, sah, it seems like dar was got to be mighty onpleasant circumstances goin' to happen around dis parish before de night's out and done wid."

No one seemed inclined to dispute the assertion.

It is a hopeless task to build up a solid foundation of disproof on the shifting sands of prophecy.

Boaz put his hand under his chair, found his replenished tumbler, and raising it to his mouth, took a long pull at it. He put it back under his chair again, thrust his hands with deliberate slowness into his pockets, and added :

“ Dar is jest de same sort o’ gineral permiscuous feelin’s of misery and onsettlements around dat dey was in de old yeller-jack skeer de time I was a li’l chile.”

“ So ? ” queried the long recruit ; and they all spat.

“ Curious ! ” said Wilberforce Gumme, the coloured chemist, taking his pipe out of his mouth and pensively spitting at a knot-hole in the floor, “ yestidday I see’d seven pelicans flappin’ across de sunset.” He spat at the mark again and scored. “ Dis evenin’ I see’d only *six* pelicans flappin’ across de sunset. Looks like dar was somethin’ uncertain bound to happen.”

They all spat and nodded their heads.

Quiet had settled upon the room. The contemplation of Destiny about to strike will silence even a gambling-hell.

Long Burke drew a cigar out of his breeches’ pocket, and handed it to Boaz Bryan, the object of his idolatry, who nodded, bit off the end, spat it

out, and put the cigar in his mouth. Burke struck a match on the seat of his breeches, and gave him the light. Bryan puffed at the cigar, getting the tobacco well fired.

The sexton, Lazarus Goole, took his clay pipe out of his mouth, blew out a cloud of smoke, and gazed into the midst of it.

“Huh-huh!” grunted he. “Cu’ious! Certainly it seems like dar was somethin’ goin’ to happen—sure-ly—sure-ly!” The sexton had a local reputation for wisdom and particular knowledge of the ways of the Creator in relation to all matters concerning death and doom, the weather, and the end of things. Indeed, Lazarus Goole was considered to be as solid an opinion on immortality as a bishop. He bore also the weight of gentility—he smoked but did not spit.

“Cu’ious!—cu’ious!” cooed the ladies.

“De symptoms dat my friend Wilberforce Gumme see’d has jest kind o’ hustled my remembrance wid a fact,” said ole man Scannells, the retired trader. “I no catch’d sleep de whole o’ last night. Seemed like me bed was turned to pebble-stones. I groan’d and toss’d and worrit and toss’d. Turn dis side—turn’d dat side—and tumbled and toss’d. Don’t got no sleep at all. Cuss’d hard. Wid dat my wife she growded contentious, and she tell’d me: ‘Dat no good—no

good at all — only scan'alize de neighbours, and spoil yo'r chance of a future state,' says she, ' and dat's 'bout as likely anyway as a prayer-meetin' in a grog-shop,' says she. Den dat blamed spotted dog o' Beggs's begin'd to tune up and yowl. When Beggs's dog sottles down to yowlin' it makes a man feel like he was mostly compoged o' nothin' exceppin' he's bowels." He spat at the knot-hole in the floor, and failed to score. " Huh-huh ! dat a fact, Mr. Lazarus, sure-ly ; " he went on ; " oh yes, dey is signs around ; it seems like dar was somethin' oncertain bound to happen." And he wagged his chin affirmatively.

The long recruit coughed.

" Beggs's dog he's a miser'ble dog, I reckon," said he, " nevertheless de aide-jer-conk's is miserabler. Beggs's dog he done got dat low-down religious kind o' look on he, I don't goin' to deny dat ; nevertheless de time when Masheen Dyle and me put he up agin de master-tailor for a match agin de aide-jer-conk's long dog he kind o' drapped de religion and knocked de perspiration out of de aide-jer-conk's four-legged concern. He's got a manner o' hangin' on to de front foot of de other dog dat's mighty pretty in a un-military dog ; and whilst de other dog was worritin' heself nibblin' at Beggs's behine quarters, Beggs he was jest chewin' he's gums settlin' in he's cog-

itations which foot o' de aide-jer-conk's he was goin' to lacerate—but I reckon I is gittin' off of prognostications on to dog-fightin'."

A look of disappointment passed round the listeners.

"Dat's so," said the sexton severely, the light of battle dying out of his eyes as all prospect of the dog-fight disappeared. "Yo' was sayin'—?"

"Last evenin'," said the big recruit, "dat long low-lyin' black dog of de aide-jer-conk's was singin' and yowlin' like dar was goin' to be a funeral and de Dead Marching Saul. Dey long dogs appears to me is all bowels like a bugle, and by consequence dey has a heap o' feelin's when de moon is riz. Dey is vig'rous strong yowlers when dey gits started givin' way to deir feelin's. Appears like deir hearts don't got enough work to do wid pumpin' de blood into dey short little legs, so dey gits a heap o' strength into de yowlin' parts o' dem—but I reckon I is gettin' off prognostications again."

Scarcely a sound stirred in the room. Lazarus Goole looked severely at the big recruit:

"De yowlin's o' dogs takes some explainin'," said he.

They all nodded. And the spitters spat.

The sexton uncrossed his legs, and recrossed them—the other leg over.

"Yes, sah," said he, feeling that the pause demanded episcopal authority: "dogs don't git yowlin' for nothin'."

They all nodded agreement.

Boaz Bryan, his bearded chin on his chest, gazed gloomily at his great booted feet.

"Dat so," said he. "Dat so. And dey is no arguin' round de facts — de dogs *has* settled down to yowlin' consider'ble. When de moon riz dis evenin', dat yeller slut o' de schoolmaster's what dey calls High-pollytoes she puts she's nose in de air and let a yowl out o' she's insides fit to wake a 'pothecary — 'Hoo — oo — oo ! urgh-ow-wow-wow-oo-oo-oo !'"

The travesty of the dog's style of baying nettled the irritable schoolmaster, who always resented any offensive allusion to his dog, particularly any question as to its sex, as a personal attack upon himself. His paste-coloured face bleached and his pale lips turned blue.

"These dog's yowlin's and death-watches are ignorant blind delusions," he said tartly, with a severe air, "they are worse — they are blasphemous idolatry. They are the mere relics — the intaglio, or perhaps I should rather say the embroglio, of decayed and, as it were, ornate superstition." He looked round and added: "There's no sense in such talk."

Boaz Bryan laughed a deep bass laugh.

"De schoolmaster can git along to de top o' de class," said he, winking at the others. A titter went round, and the long recruit guffawed. "For a man," Bryan added with judicial calm — "for a man, I don't hold de schoolmaster o' much account, meself; but for a scholar, my holy gracious! de way he can git he's mouth round some o' dey high-falutin' words — !"

"This is neither a subject for scoffing nor yet for a display of ignoramus," broke in the schoolmaster haughtily, "but I feel that I am only wastin' me grammar on the desert air in the enforcement of a foregone problem."

Boaz spat.

"I don't goin' to deny yo' gits a heap o' comfort out o' dis here grammar, Mr. Nicodemus — not at all," said he, and winked at the room. "I don't rightly calc'late to understand what dis here grammar's bound to be exactly, meself; but it appears to bring a heap o' satisfaction to dem as has it."

The seated figures took their pipes out of their mouths, and winked at Boaz Bryan. The argument had got beyond them, so, as more civilized people do, they took up a comic attitude of contempt. The lean schoolmaster's pale face flushed.

"I repeat," said he irritably, "de prognostica-

tions of evil from de howlin's of dogs is not a fit and proper subject for fears."

"O' course not," said Boaz Bryan bitingly.
"Oh no! dey is some folks is afear'd o' nothin'."

They all laughed vulgarly and winked to each other again — the schoolmaster had a poor reputation for physical courage.

"I has no desire to get into contention wid yo', Mr. Bryan," said he with a wave of the hand, relapsing for an angry moment from the academic into the vernacular; then with dignity, "upon matters to which you are ridiculously impervious — I might almost say unpercolative. You have cast a most unwarrantable and libellous charge of insomnia agin me dog. But as a gentleman of edicashion I has sufficient charity to pass by without notice such unsolicited insult. Nevertheless I takes this opportunity to say dat de belief in sorcery and the use of the singular verb to agree with plural nominative appears to me to give colour to de otherwise absurd contention of the supe'iority of de white man over coloured persons."

Boaz snorted — laughed drily — then said with deliberate slowness :

"Supe'io'ty? — it are a mighty long word, Mr. Nicodemus. Howsoever I has allers notice dis here circumstance — when a white man tells a black man 'do dis!' de black man he does it —

when a black man tells a white man ‘do dis !’ de white man he *don’t* do it —when a black man tells a black man ‘do dis !’ dey both gits into argument which o’ de two are de supe’iaw.” He took his cigar out of his mouth and spat. “Some folks talks about supe’io’ity ; some folks keeps deir mouth shut about dem things.” He fumbled under his chair, fished out his glass, and holding his cigar in the other hand, drained the tumbler of its liquor. When he had done he blew a breath. “Some folks is ijiotics,” said he, holding the empty glass up to the light, and gazing through it—“some folks is *not* ijiotics. It’s de Lord’s will. I allers has compassion in me bowels for de ijiotics, meself.”

He got up, and, walking over to the table, set the empty glass down upon it.

The schoolmaster felt that Boaz Bryan had fallen to unpopular doctrine, and his eyes brightened. He rarely tasted the sweetness of popularity.

“I hold de contention dat dis argiment o’ yours, Mr. Bryan, don’t establish de supe’io’ity o’ de white man,” said he, encouraged to pursuit by the sight of Bryan’s back.

“Huh-huh !” grunted the others affirmatively, wavering toward the schoolmaster and deserting Bryan in a body, not seeing to what fearful surrender Bryan might be leading them.

Boaz Bryan brought his great fist down upon the table with a bang, and the glasses leaped and clinked. He turned on them all from where he stood at the table, scowling :

"I has no patience wid coloured folks dat thinks dey is white folks," he roared. "Coloured folks is coloured folks, and white folks is white folks." He glared round to see whether any one denied the statement. "What de good to worry yo'r wool about it? De black man he thinks one way — de white man he thinks anudder way. Dat all. It's de Lord's will. If yo' is born'd a horn'd beast yo' has got to go down on yo'r four legs and chew grass — and thank God yo' has de grass to chew. It don't make yo' any more dan a horn'd beast because yo' has nominatives and grammar and things. Dey has got to be white folks and dey has got to be black folks, and dey has got to be horn'd beasts. . . . I ask yo'— done edication make a black man white? Done pernicious imperance make a black man white? No. A lazy passel o' niggers gits sittin' round on deir doorsteps swappin' expe'iences and lyin' about deir carryin'-on, dis one pattin' de back o' de next, and de next one slappin' de back o' de next, and each one slappin' de back o' de t'other — one goin' bigger dan de other, ontil de biggest liar gits dat filled out wid he's own conse-

quence he gits de notion into he dat he are a bigger man dan de Gub'nor o' de Colony." He spat on the floor and snorted. "Dar are no sense in such nigger-talk — it are all a pack of awdacious lies and gineral tom-foolishness."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Huh!" said the schoolmaster with a sneer, "yo'd think yo' wasn't a nigger yo'self."

Boaz laughed roughly.

He walked to his seat and sat down, settling himself in his chair with awkward slow deliberation.

"No," said he, and he smiled; "I is as black as the balance of yo'. I don't goin' to complain. De good Lord see'd fit to make I a nigger; but I d'clare to God I don't rightly unnerstand whar I done git de sense to *know* I is a nigger —"

The laugh, led by the long recruit, came back to Boaz Bryan.

"Huh! yo' is modest, Mr. Bryan," said the schoolmaster with a fine sneer, feeling that he was losing the flood of popularity; and he knocked the tobacco-ashes off his waistcoat preparatory to getting up and taking his leave.

"Modest be damned!" said Boaz Bryan roughly. "I knows black wool when I sees it. And I calls it black wool." He drew in his great feet under his chair, and putting his hands on his

knees, snorted at the schoolmaster. "De fact o' de matter are dis here, Mr. Schoolmaster." He wagged a black forefinger solemnly at the other. "Dis island are full to bustin'-p'int wid a passel o' supe'iaw colour'd folk dat is hiccupin' wid deir own consequence. Yo' all stand round de bar at ole man Huckleback's here, and de rum gits into yo'r wool; and because yo' want to be as good a man as de white man yo' gits swearin' dis, dat, and t'other thing that yo' *is* as good as de white man. And jest because de white man don't kick yo' in de stomach to give de point to he's superiority yo' think he *allow* yo' is as good as de white man — and de reason he don't kick yo' in de stomach it's jest about because yo' amuses he."

"Dis here is a free country, Mr. Bryan," said the schoolmaster, "and de Constitution it makes one man de equal of de others."

Boaz Bryan snorted. "When a man gits sartin' sure o' things, he don't got de need to be allers talkin' about it. I tell yo' it's de rum mostly dat makes de black man and de white man equal and de same. When yo' git along home from de rum-store, and de spirits done sink outen of yo', and yo' has got to face de facts alone wid yo'self in yo'r back parlour—dar, wid no lyin' t'other feller to talk back a heap o' blamed foolishness he don't rightly believe heself — dar yo'

has got to settle de argiments wid facts. And I reckon yo' know it are all tom-foolishness and permiscuous hallellooyah about de black man is de same like de white man. I ax yo' why done de coloured man allers actin' like he want to be a white man, exceppin' he reckon de white man de supe'iaw? He's soul's all de same — nevertheless de black man's de black man to de white man. Dat why yo' and me, Mr. Nicodemus, is drinkin' grog at ole man Huckleback's, and talkin' 'bout de supe'io'ity o' de black man — and dat why de white man he's bossin' de colony. All t'udder talk are flam-blam foolishness. Yo' know dat. I know dat. I calc'late we is better talkin' 'bout hosses, or molasses, or maybe A.B.C., or dem things we knows about. Sho!" Bryan sank back in his chair, out of breath with disgust, and blew through his lips. "Ask de coloured women!" . . . He laughed drily. . . . "When a white man calls to a coloured gal, whar are de black men den? I ax yo' dat." . . . He sat up again. "Sho! I tell yo', Mr. Nicodemus, b'iled down it come to dis here — de white man he's only got to walk into de street and call to de coloured woman, 'Come along wid me, my gal!' and de coloured woman she straightway leaves de black man and —"

"It's a lie!"

The door shut with a loud slam.

Huckleback stepped into the room.

“It’s a lie, Boaz Bryan !” he said hoarsely.

He halted under the wall-lamp, the light casting a great shadow over his sallow face and down over the front of him. He stood so, his chin on his chest, a black scowl upon his shadowed face, his arms hanging inertly by his sides.

“It’s a lie — a blasted lie !” he repeated.

A heavier silence fell upon the room, and all the serious brown faces turned to the scowling figure that stood before them.

Bryan’s lips moved, shaping themselves to a hot reply, but a strange look upon his old friend’s face silenced the retort that sprang to his tongue, and he said nothing. Huckleback stood there in the breathless silence, and no one spoke a word. He drew a long breath, and added with hoarse drunken insistence :

“By the living God ! it’s a lie — ”

There was a drunken laugh outside. The grog-shop door swung open, and Anak Streke, the English sailor, in clumsy seafaring clothes and long sea-boots, lurched into the room. He was followed by the rumstore-keeper’s wife Jezebel, who flaunted in airily, arrayed in white muslin fineries bedecked with coloured ribbons. She let the door swing to with a slam ; put her back

against it ; and fanned herself affectedly with her handkerchief. The burly sailor rolled a few paces into the room, pulled up, planted his heavily-booted feet well apart to steady himself, thrust his hands into his trousers' pockets, and blinked round upon them all in a dazed way. His heavy eyes travelled slowly over the seated folk, and at last rested on the scowling figure of Huckleback where he stood statuesquely sullen under the lamp. Anak Streke's countenance lighted up.

“ Hillo ! — (hic) — Hucker — (hic) — back ! ” He tripped over the name, and repeated it slowly, “ Huckle — (hic) — back ! Evenin’, Huckle — (hic) — back ! ”

Huckleback did not move nor answer.

“ Evenin’, messmates — (hic) — to you all ! ” Anak Streke waved his hand round the room, and thrust his hand in his pocket again.

No one spoke.

Anak Streke laughed — a little shamefacedly.

“ There’s a — (hic) — blasted hiccup — (hic) — got wrecked in my gullet, and I can’t float it off. A reg’lar water-logged hiccup ! — (hic) — a damned derelict hiccup ! . . . And its foulin’ the water-way. I can’t understand it — ” he shook his head — “ I never drink water — (hic) — except at first-class hotels.”

There was no reply. And the muteness of

them all caused him to lift an inquiring eyebrow. He thrust his hand deep down into the pocket of his breeches and brought out a handful of silver.

“I'll stan' the drinks, mates,” said he. “It's — (hic) — it's my call.”

He waved the fistful of money grandly, but the silver pieces slipped from his clumsy grip and fell in a clinking shower upon the floor. One straggling coin ran along on its edge, rolling and circling on the boards ; it swept into narrower eddies ; and, toppling over with a tremulous beating upon the floor, settled to rest. Anak Streke watched it with intense drunken interest ; then said with a large command :

“Some blasted nigger pick up the coin !”

No one moved.

Anak Streke spat.

“Wha' are yer all starin' at ? you — (hic) — blurry painted semaphores !” he bawled.

He glared at them with a displeased frowning of the brows, but his eyes came to rest on a stout negress, whereon he smiled, and added with a jocular air :

“Wha's up wi' em all, eh — my dear ?” The woman said nothing, and blinked uncomfortably. “What's up, I say ? you pot-bellied old shoal-buoy !”

The stout old lady looked offended. Anak

Streke made a playful lurch at her to embrace her, which she indignantly avoided. He stood and looked at her seriously, then turning to the rest he added :

“ No offence, mates, no offence ! I’m goin’ to stand the drinks — I’ll pay for the whole blurry picnic.”

The semicircle of brown faces grinned, showing white teeth.

He thrust his hands deep in his pockets again, and sniggered foolishly.

“ Well, I declare, we *are* a-going of it.” He blew through his dry lips, then added pensively : “ My blurry skipper’s settin’ sail at daylight — *that’s* all right ! But I dunno how the blurry cast-iron davits he’s goin’ to jerk *me* aboard — ‘s truth ! I don’t. I can’t get aboard — tooraloora wheeyoo ! — I can’t get aboard. I don’t know a blurry bo’sun from a blurry horse-radish. . . . I’ve jest been all down Harbour Street to-night (hic). Couldn’t find my ship ! I struck a blurry match, but *I* couldn’t find my blurry ship. Nothin’ but lamposts ! All down one side — lamposts ! All up the other side — lamposts. . . . Very dangerous for navigation. It makes the steerin’ — (hic) — blurry difficult, their showin’ so many lights — blurry confusin’. . . . So I put ‘em all out. And then — (hic) — the blurry medlin’ p’lice comes

interferin' and adds to the difficulties of a seafarin' life." He looked at them all solemnly.

"Any one here got a blurry lantern?" he asked, raising one inquiring brow.

No one spoke.

He sighed :

"*No* one got a blurry lantern!"

He dug his hands further into his pockets. "Then how the blue thunder can I find my blurry ship? I ask you, as man to man — how the devil's a man that ain't a blurry tom-cat to find his blurry old leaky ship in the blurry dark when he ain't got a blurry lantern? It ain't blurry common sense. It ain't blurry flurry common sense!"

He looked round to see if any one dared to deny it. Then he laughed grimly.

"Well," said he, "s'help me Gawd, this 'ere is a blurry merry picnic, *this* is! . . . The lot o' you is as noisy and gay as a blurry smoked ham. Begod," he spat aggressively, "I has known ship's pork as was noisier — *and* gayer."

A sickly smile flickered round the seated company.

Anak Streke lugged a battered cigar out of his trousers' pocket and set it between his lips, chewing it and mouthing it whilst he fumbled about in each of his several pockets in turn searching for a match. He found one and struck it on the seat of

his breeches, but his mind turned to Huckleback standing silent and sullen under the lamplight, and he forgot the flame of the match that wavered in his hand until it burnt him and he dropped it, keeping his heavy eyes on Huckleback.

"Hullo! Huckle—(hic)—back—ole man! I want a drink. . . . I want a glass o' this blurry Jamaica bilgewater o' your'n — neat. . . . I allers takes my bilgewater neat — (hic). I'm a man — *I am*. Bilgewater without water or no bilgewater, say I — (hic) — that's my motter. Whether I'm runnin' free in Calcutta or Rio or Valparaiso — or Hell or the Ratcliffe Highway — that's my motter. I'm a sailor, *I am*. A blurry, Gawd-forsaken, patch-trouser, British mercantile marine — (hic) — Gawd 'elp us!"

Huckleback stood there and spoke never a word.

Anak Streke turned and looked at them all. A frown came over his face.

"Wha' are yer starin' at, all of yer?" he growled, with an ugly oath, their silence fretting him.

"No offence, mates," he added, his mood as suddenly changing again. "What's the rest on yer a-goin' to 'ave, eh?" He swept his arm round the room again with a large air of generosity. In the act his glance fell upon Jezebel.

"Hullo!" cried he, and lurched over to where she stood in her finery with her back against the door. "Look 'ere," he cried, catching her by the arm, and dragging her out into the room, "here's a wench for yer!"

She came—half-reluctant, half-pleased to take the stage—shook his hand off, pouting—and giggled. He thrust the discarded hand into his pocket, and looked her proudly up and down:

"'Ere's rollickin', slap-up, neat-goin', everlastin' perdition for yer!" said he. "My word! she's a woman, that!" He chuckled, then added proudly: "She's 'eld my blurry 'at and my blurry pipe whilst I've insulted every policeman we've met—four of 'em there was—or maybe five—from the jetty to the parish church—(hic)—'specially the parish church!" He smiled contemplatively. "He was a plump one that. And I hit him in the windpipe and rolled him over—(hic)—rolled him *right* over—and Jezebel she sat on his stomach—like a blurry mermaid on a blurry rock—and then she kissed him. . . . Ho-ho! that was choice, I tell yer. I dared her, and she kissed him. It was just Gawdforsaken waste o' kissin', but it was blurry funny. Oh yes—we '*ave*' been funny—blurry funny. The policeman at the parish church—(hic)—*he allowed we was funny.*"

He chuckled.

"Oh yes — we slapped 'is 'ead — and gave 'im 'alf-a-crown — and *asked* 'im. And he *allowed* we was funny."

Jezebel tittered. He gazed at her amorously.

"Come 'ere!" he said roughly, trying to embrace her, but she evaded him. He caught her rudely by the arm, and put his hand on her shoulder.

She shook her shoulder free of him.

"Lef' me alone — lef' it!" she cried with a pout. "Lef' me alone!"

He guffawed.

She flounced down the room, arranging her disordered dress with quick deft fingers as she went. Her wandering eye caught sight of the distant widow Tiffles crouching in the far dim-lit corner of the room. She stopped to adjust a ribbon, ran her eyes over the group of seated people, and suddenly walking up to Boaz Bryan where he sat in their midst, she slapped him on the shoulder with her hand. Her clear voice broke the silence:

"How yo' is, ole man Boaz?" she asked cheerily, and before Boaz Bryan had time to answer she stooped down, lifted his bearded face between her two hands, and kissed him upon the mouth.

Boaz gave an embarrassed laugh.

Jezebel drew herself up insolently, stared at Huckleback standing scowling there under the lamplight, and burst into loud rollicking laughter. One or two of the seated figures sniggered nervously in the gloom.

Huckleback stood silent, sullen, and spoke never a word. He swayed a little — his shadowed face glowering at Jezebel, and his chest breathing heavily.

Anak Streke lurched up to Jezebel.

“Look ‘ere, ole gal,” said he, flinging an arm round her and pulling her towards him, “you’re in tow wi’ me.” And with boisterous horseplay he held down her arms in his and kissed her.

She pushed him away petulantly.

Anak Streke laughed loudly :

“Now she purtends she don’t like it — just *like* a woman.”

He spoke as out of a wide experience. Then his mood changed fitfully :

“Look ‘ere,” he said, in a sudden accession of virtue, “go to your lawful husband!” He turned about to the rumstore-keeper and added : “Look a’ me, and jest you listen, Huckleback, ole man. Jezebel, she — (hic) — she’s all right for a bloomin’ spell — for a spell, mind yer. But — (hic) — I wouldn’t sign papers with her for a long voyage — not I — by no manner o’ means. Damme

if I would! . . . Two days is enough for Anak Streke, able seaman. Mind yer, I ain't one to complain, I don't say as it's been like Sunday-school. I don't complain — not at all. I tell yer we've been in the forefront o' the battle — no mistake about it. We've painted this constellation a sort o' fancy pink, I promise you. Not that I takes objection to the forefront o' the battle, you understand. Not at all. But with Jezebel it's all battle — damme, it's nothin' *but* battle. Begod, we've insulted half the town — leastways that part as lies adjacent to the sea. We've put out all the lamps on the port side o' Harbour Street. We've sat on the stomachs of law and order — and smacked the heads o' the same — s'help me! But that's all right. I signed to undertake such duties as was in the ordinary course of a sailor's callin'. I'm no slouch. I don't take no exception to all that — ” he swept his arm round generously, as though to forgive the world its faults — “ not at all. But this arternoon she made up to my skipper, and blurry near put me foul o' him. . . . And now,” he added with the air of one doing a duty, “ I've brought her home.”

Jezebel stood, with a sneer on her lips, holding herself insolently.

The hot blood welled blackly into Huckleback's face and throat. He reached out his arm

and pointed to the man Anak Streke, and his hoarse voice broke the pause :

“ Has yo’ been wid dis white trash, yo’—? ” said he, with an oath, in threatening query to Jezebel ; and he called her by a foul name.

Jezebel slowly gazed at him ; then, with a contemptuous curl of the lip, she stalked up to him, her arms akimbo, her hands upon her hips. She knew all eyes were upon her ; she felt that she was on her trial for style before the most gossiping company in the island — all the world to her — the people she lived amongst. She halted a pace or so before the scowling man, stared him defiantly in the face, and laughed insultingly.

Black anger filled Huckleback’s gorge.

“ Stand away from me — Jezebel ! ” he said, and his utterance was thick with passion. “ Stand back ! or, by Golgotha, I’ll make yo’ into meat for de buzzards ! ”

She spat full in his face.

Huckleback brushed his sleeve across his eyes. And when he dropped his arm they saw that a hot red spot burned on each sallow cheek. He stepped a pace into the room, and with his clenched fist struck Jezebel under the chin. She reeled, and staggered backwards ; and as she staggered from him he put out his hand, gripped hold of her gorgeous befrilled bodice at the shoulder, and tore it open to the waist.

She uttered a low frightened cry, reeled back in a dazed way to Anak Streke, the English sailor, and clung to him, sobbing that she had been struck.

The act sent the bad blood to Huckleback's brain ; it filled his eyes, and sang in his ears, and urged him to evil purpose. His scowling face was in dark shadow, but in the shadow his eyes gleamed with a red light, as the eyes of a dog flash when in savage anger. And as he stood there in ugly murderous mood, his glance fell upon the handle of a jack-knife that lay in its leatheren sheath on the hip of a black sailor who sat near to him. A swift cat-like stride brought him within reach of it. Without looking at it, his fingers went out stealthily, closed over the handle, and whipped the blade from its case.

Anak Streke's eyes caught the act, and the fog lifted from his wits in the time that he took to breathe one breath. He made a stern effort to clear his blurred sight of the haze of his potations. His senses, trained by the treacherous sea, sobered at the scent of deadly peril, and his understanding from thenceforth watched alertly every movement of Huckleback's.

An awful silence had settled upon the room.

Anak Streke pushed aside the woman Jezebel, who sobbed upon his shoulder, and faced the danger.

"Drop that knife!" he shouted commandingly to Huckleback.

For answer Huckleback stepped down the room with the knife gripped in his hand. He came craftily, cat-like, as a leopard might, with head thrust forward and stooping; and there was only one purpose writ upon him.

Streke went to meet him. As he came up within reach of him, and as Huckleback crouched to spring at him, the English sailor gathered together all his great strength, and suddenly smote him with his might full upon the mouth. Huckleback's heels clattered upon the boards as he staggered backwards; he threw up his arms, and fell heavily upon the floor.

Jezebel ran up to Anak Streke and cast her arms about his neck.

"No, no — Anak! — no, no!" she whimpered.

He cleared himself of the woman and flung her roughly from him, with an oath.

"You'd hold down my arms, would you?" cried he. "I know your curséd accomplice tricks — and the accomplice tricks of the likes of you — you hell's painted scarlet trull! . . . If there's to be blood spilt to-night, then leave me my arms free! . . . A fight's a fight. We'll have no murder here."

Jezebel whimpered, wringing her hands.

There was a noise of chairs being pushed back as several figures rose to their feet in the tawny gloom. Anak Streke turned fiercely upon them.

"Sit down, every woman's son of you! If a man amongst you leaves his seat, or moves up alongside o' me, by the Lord God, I'll kill him. . . . Sit down, I say!" he roared.

They sat down.

"If this damned thing must be — then it shall be a fair fight between man and man — I'll have no rushing here," said Streke roughly.

A deathlike stillness again took possession of the room, broken only by Jezebel's sobs.

Anak Streke, stooping forward, straining his eyes to watch the movements of the fallen man, stepped back pace by pace away from him, and thus crouching, on the alert and watchful of treachery from every side, he backed slowly, step by step — backed and backed towards the swinging door that opened into the side-street.

But Huckleback had clumsily risen to his feet. He passed his hand across his forehead confusedly, and alas! his roving eyes fell upon the knife where it lay at his feet. His wandering wits came reeling back to him in some jolting measure, and he glared down the room, suddenly remembering his injury. He saw Anak Streke backing towards the door, felt that he was slowly escaping into the

gloom, and the lust of murder came upon him. His brain went scarlet-red with blood. With the rout of his senses fear was gone from him. He stooped down with some difficulty, picked up the ugly blade, and in blind fury rushed at the retreating man.

Boaz Bryan leaped up with a shout to stop the fray, and the room-full of people sprang up together with a roar to the same intent. But Huckleback dashed through them. Streke sighed, put his back to the wall, bent down in the midst of the din, and slipped his right hand into his long sea-boot — the glint of steel as he drew it out again showed that he had found a knife. Facing the blinding flicker of the dancing lights and shadows and the confusing movement of the rushing people, he planted himself firmly on his feet, as a wrestler bends to take the grip, and awaited the blow. . . . There was a scraping of chairs upon the floor as the throng all uprose — the clatter of a falling table — a crash and clink of broken glass — some candles went out — and the shadows cast by the moving people played the blacker upon the walls. A rush of feet — and the rabble closed in. Above the throng a flash of steel rising slowly upwards, striking swiftly downwards — the heavy breathing and straining of a scuffle — a struggle. A chair scraped, toppled over, and clattered on the boards.

Again a swift downward glint of steel—a deep-drawn sigh—a body staggered heavily backwards, threw up its arms, hung rigid for a while—the shadows leaped and played upon the wall—and in the midst of the shadows Huckleback fell.

The inert body brushed down the wall and collapsed in the darkness upon the floor, the shoulders supported by the wainscot, chin on chest. The black shadows that hovered over the peering hesitating folk steadied, halted, and were still—the din ceased. For a breathing space no man moved, and the voice of them all was silenced.

At the end of the room, in the tense pause, the little clock purred hoarsely and slowly struck the hour.

The crowding people fell back from the dying man. The growl and mutter were breaking out again, and the shadows once more began to flutter upon the walls—

Jezebel sprang amongst the whispering, muttering, awestricken throng, and hushed the rising racket. She pushed the frontmost of them roughly aside.

“ Back ! Stan’ back ! ” she cried shrilly, “ and curse yo’ all ! ”

She swept her arm towards the door :

“ Out o’ dis ! Git to yo’r beds and yo’r wives and yo’r women, and leave dis place to de police

— and me. . . . Out o' dis! — to hell — or where yo' is more welcome dan here!"

They waited no further bidding but trooped out in silence. As their feet shuffled off, the lamp in the grog-shop went out, and Jezebel could hear the potman put up the last shutter and slip softly away.

As the last of them hurried out and their foot-fall died away in the quiet street, Jezebel turned, and her eyes beheld the English sailor, Anak Streke.

"Gahd!" said the startled woman.

Anak Streke stood in the gloom bending forward with his arms hanging down and staring past her into the deep shadows at the black thing that lay there at her feet. He gripped a bloody knife in his right hand and stared and stared. There was a drawn look about his mouth. His lips and tongue were parched of all moisture — his throat refused to swallow. He felt the warm wet blood trickle over his fingers. He looked at his hand and dropped the knife. Then the beads of perspiration came out and glistened on his blanched forehead. He wiped the back of his hand across his sweaty brows in a dazed effort to make the thinking part of him think — recollect — act. It came to him that he had done some deadly thing. As he wiped away the sweat his hand left a deep red stain upon him above his eyes.

Jezebel burst into a dreadful shriek of hysterical laughter.

"De mark o' Cain are upon yo', Anak Streke!" she cried, pointing at him with outstretched arm — and a long-armed answering shadow fell athwart the wall, accusing him likewise. The woman burst into another shriek of dreadful laughter, and dancing with her feet, chanted it.

"De mark — of — Cain — are — upon — yo',
Anak Streke!"

She laughed again and again, and pointed —

Suddenly she pulled herself together, frightened at the scared look which came over the man. The stain of the red streaks above his eyes told like a fired brand upon his livid face. Jezebel checked herself with a throttling effort, strode up to him, and said huskily :

"Why is yo' no gone from dis here place,
Anak Streke? What for is yo' puttin' yo'r neck
in de hangin'-rope?"

Anak Streke blinked and stared at her.

"Cain? — neck? — hangin'?" he queried plaintively; then added sulkily: "It were a fair fight, I tell yer — I ain't afear'd o' justice. I fought for my life. He — "

Jezebel laughed mockingly.

"Oh yes, a heap o' justice yo' is goin' to get

from twelve coloured men ! A black jury gives de white folks a heap o' justice, n'ya ! — jest 'bout as much as white folks gives de black man."

The English sailor looked from her to the fallen man and was dumb.

Jezebel stamped her foot impatiently.

" Me Gahd ! is yo' goin' to wake up, Anak Streke ? What for yo' no listen to what I's tellin' yo' ? . . . The policeman is bound to happen round in de early cockcrows, I reckon. . . . Dese jabberin' niggers is bound to jabber. Mebbe some o' dem is wid de p'lice dis very moment ! "

Anak looked at her mutely, but did not stir.

She whimpered ; fiercely controlled the dreadful desire to laugh ; and said quickly :

" Get de drink out o' yo'r head, Anak Streke — for de love o' Gahd, wash yo'r hands o' dis thing."

She went up to him. He held out his hand mutely ; and she wiped it with the skirts of her gown as though he had been a soiled child. And he let her.

When she had done, he dropped his hand listlessly by his side. She reached up and wiped his forehead.

" Now, Anak," said she hoarsely, " save yo'-self ! "

He raised his hand before him and looked at the open palm, then at her.

She shook him roughly by the arm.

He gazed at her sadly — a mild resentful look in his eyes.

His sluggishness moved her to panic. She stepped back a pace from him and raising her hands to her head she gripped her fingers in her hair and ground her teeth, growling.

Then she burst out again into dreadful laughter, her feet dancing gruesomely :

“ I see de mark o’ de rope on yo’r neck, Anak Streke ! I see it — red — and tight ! I — ”

She ceased on a sudden, and stamped her foot upon the floor. “ If yo’ is goin’ to save yo’self, Anak Streke, yo’ has got to lift yo’r heels and git movin’ — for Gahd’s sake, man, git movin’ ! ”

The sailor watched her pensively under his knit brows until she had done — then he spat upon the floor — turned about — and, tramping heavily towards the swinging door, he pushed it open and lurched into the night.

Jezebel stood for some time after he had gone. Then she was sorry he was gone. She felt lonely. She turned and looked at the dark thing lying amongst the shadows at her feet. There was a great wet stain on the door about the fallen rumstore-keeper’s left side. She went round to the other side of him to avoid it; carefully adjusted her skirts so as to save them from injury;

and dropped on her knees by the stricken man.
“Is yo’ hurt, poor ole heart—is yo’ hurt?” she whimpered.

There was no reply.

She rested her hand on his chest, stooped down, held her ear close to his mouth, and listened. She had almost given him up for dead when his eyelids fluttered, and she caught the faint whisper of a sigh. The lips smiled contentedly: “At de gate—whar de—dead folks—pass—through.” The ill-used body gave a last feeble struggle for breath, and the warm crimson stream of his life gushed from his wound and welled over Jezebel’s hand, where it lay upon his chest. The scent of his blood came to her nostrils. She gave a little cry—glanced at her hand with a look of disgust—then wiped it upon the dead man’s clothes.

She rose from her knees and stood up.

“Huckleback he war a good friend—to—me,” she whimpered; then cried some useless tears of self-pity.

After a while the silence calmed her.

“Seems like he’s giv’d up de ghost!” she said to herself with a shiver—and an echo in the empty room whispered “ghost!”

Jezebel glanced over her shoulders and moved away from the dead man uneasily. She went to the street door, opened it, and looked out.

The chill breath of the small hours was in the air.

"It are kind o' skeery here," she said, speaking aloud to keep herself company. "I guess I is bound to tell de police-folk dese things. That seems like it was de correct and proper thing for de widder to do. Nevertheless," she added, "I guess I is better goin' and gittin' changin' me clothes any way."

But before she went upstairs she took all the vessels in the room that contained water and flung out the contents through the doorway into the street. Lest Death, having cooled his sting, had poisoned the water in one she laid waste the whole.

Then walking over to the door at the far end of the room, which led to the living-rooms of the house, she disappeared into the dark passage within. . . .

When Jezebel re-entered through this doorway an hour later, gorgeously arrayed in a complete change of clothing, she was pulling on some black thread gloves, smoothing them over her fingers to make them fit closely and well.

"Huh-huh!" she muttered, "I reckon dar are no doubt it are de correct and proper circumstance for de widder to tell de p'lice when de husband gits into accidents."

She came to a standstill in the middle of the room, and added tentatively :

"Peradventure Sister Stakkerpipe *she* knows de correct style in dese circumstances — she's father he war a man o' propartee befo' he done lost it — I think I can do worse dan go round and ax' *she*."

She slapped her skirt with her hand to make it sit over her hips, walked to the swinging door, opened it, looked up and down the street, stepped out into the dark, and was gone.

The door had scarcely stopped swinging when it was stealthily pushed open, and Melissa Haplass looked in. She crept in silently, shut the door carefully after her, stooped, and peered about the room. She walked swiftly down its length, then of a sudden with a sobbing cry ran eagerly to where the fallen man lay. She dropped on her knees beside him, whimpering; took his head upon her lap; and kissed the poor dead face over and over again. She hugged him to her breasts, trying to warm him, sobbing and moaning, rocking herself as though she were soothing a child. Her tears streamed from her eyes and fell upon him, washing his sins from him. She put him down and bending over him put her ear to his lips. They were deadly still. . . . She crooned in a low voice to the poor body, reminding it of the days that were gone. . . . She knelt and beat her hands upon the floor, and smote her head, crying to him

passionately. The only answer was the chill sneer of silence. . . . She begged the sole sorry thing she had ever worshipped to speak to her. But the fires were dead upon her altars, and the paltry god of her poor imaginings was flown. Nor other deity, nor man, nor devil gave aid to comfort her. But God, seated in the high heavens, with brooding brows pondering on the inadequacy of some of His creations, saw the sweat of the agony of a desolate woman bent under the inhuman weight of her pre-ordained destiny ; and He, knowing that she might suffer no heavier penalty of pain than this appointed by Him out of His wilful Omnipotence, in the majesty of His mercy surely cancelled the record of the sin that He had put upon her, and forgave her for her surrender to the object of her tawdry idolatry. But it did not mitigate her pain. . . .

The place became very still, except for the stealthy night-creatures. The wall-lamp flamed yellow at the end of the room. The butt-end of a solitary guttering candle, sealed to a table near at hand by its own dripping wax, cast great shadows and mysterious half-lights upon the dingy walls near about, and flung blacker mysteries down about the flooring. Mosquitoes pinged in the dark. A rat came out, sat up, and washed his face. Then another leaped from amongst the

shadows and chased him sportively along the creaking boards. Cockroaches sneaked forth from crevices, with anxious whiskers tremulously advanced, and got to nibbling scraps that lay about the floor. In the far end of the room a candle burnt to its base and guttered out, sending up a coarse stench. Candle after candle went out. . . .

And so Melissa Haplass, her timid heart straining to listen for any footfall in the street outside, sat through the chill night with the dead man's head upon her lap — sat and sobbed in the unresponsive dark. And as she so sat, the warmth gradually left him. . . . Thus mysteriously and somewhat awfully does the definite pass into the indefinite, and the indefinite into the unknown.

The last candle went out, leaving only a greasy ring of wax to show where had once been living light.

And in the small hours, as the blackness of night gave way to the glimmering grays of cockcrow, and the lamplight paled in the gray of the awakening dawn, Melissa Hapless's fearful ears heard the distant noise of approaching footsteps in the street, and hugging the dead Huckleback passionately to her breast, she kissed the ice-cold cheek, and, arising with a sob, slipped timidly away.

So they met, as Huckleback had unwittingly

appointed, at the threshold of the place where the dead pass through. So they met — and so they parted. . . .

As Melissa Hapless, with heavy eyes and overborne with pain, hurrying into the world, met the blithe day, a cock stood up arrogantly on its toes upon a dunghill and crowed with lusty throat, hailing the light, and proclaiming to the awakening world to be of good cheer, for the day was begun — and the night was past — and the past was dead.

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**IN THE HOUSE OF
THE ARISEN DEAD**

CHAPTER VII

*Which treats of the Casting out of Spirits at
Huckleback's Rum-store*

IN the black night a stout negro policeman tramped slowly down the middle of the dark street. He carried one of his large shoes in his hand, and went stocking-footed as to that foot, being galled in his extremity and running to corn — for the new leather had fretted a burning kibe upon his heel. And though he now and again cracked his stocking'd toes against a stone as he stumbled through the darkness along the ill-kept road, he preferred the anxiety of accidental affliction to the certainty of permanent pain — and it must be owned, in fairness to the street, that most things gave way to the constable's foot.

He went slowly, for he was on duty and exceedingly stout, and it was sultry hot; yet he roused himself as he came opposite to the closed shutters and locked doors of Huckleback's lodging-house — roused, and hurried past — going hasty boot-and-sock on his odd feet, and casting an anxious eye at the place, from the closely-shuttered jalousies of which came unusual sounds —

the wail of women's voices singing a hymn-tune, with the hoarse bark of men's voices that burst in and joined the dolorous chant.

"Gahd!" muttered he, "dat so — of coarse — dey is watchin' to keep away de mortal shadow of Huckleback! . . . I reckon ole man Huckleback he's bound to rise from de dead dis evenin'! . . . I reckon it are jest about time he's duppy was resurrectin' and sotlin' down on to he's premises." And he glanced nervously over his shoulder, fearing to see at his elbow the arisen disembodied shade of the dead man.

The long dingy common-room of Huckleback's lodging-house was lit up. The tawny light of the oil-lamp glowed in the gloom at one end, and flickering candles gleamed along the soiled walls. A coarse smell of assafœtida sullied the air, which was close and stuffy and further befouled with the sour odour of negroes. In the dimly-lighted room, Jezebel and her friends and intimates, men and women, stood darkly round about the four sides of a white sheet; and as they held it by its edge in their lean brown hands, standing solemnly there with the vague light playing upon their serious dark faces, they sang at the top of their several voices, their heads thrown back, the wailing refrain of a strange savage negro

dirge, a crying song of lamentation that monotonously rose and fell in melancholy cadence of repeating phrases. They stood before the place where Huckleback had been struck down, and there they had set up his bed, made with clean linen, and its pillows very white, so that it looked fresh and inviting.

Huckleback had been dead three days, and was buried. And now, on the third night, at the hour at which he had died, when his soul would rise from the grave and start on its heavenward journey to appear for judgment before his Maker, the earthly shadow of the dead man, which is called duppy, leaving the body which it has accompanied through life, would at the same time rise from the grave to take possession of his bed and haunt the house in which he had given up his breath, unless scared away by the watchers about the sheet. So they stood and wailed the dirge to keep off evil; and, singing, watched with careful eyes lest the shade of the dead man should enter the room unseen.

The closed doors and windows giving on to the street were locked and barred, only the door that led into the back premises of the lodging-house being open. And towards the black hollow of this open doorway the eyes of all who stood about the sheet, as they sang, would wander fearfully.

They were distraught with weariness, and were grown anxious, and their nerves were tense with hysterical waiting for an expected catastrophe that hangs in the visible act. It was on the stroke of the hour at which Huckleback had received his death-blow, and the strain of the long watching was making them feverishly fanciful, so that the darkness and the leaping shadows cast by the ghostly candles were beginning to hold threatening terrors, and to take on uncanny ghoulish shapes of things, the flicker of the restless flames distorting and turning to vague and fearful uncertainties much that had otherwise been wholly unseen. The dim white sheet felt strangely unreal in the cramped clutch of their tired fingers. Their throats were dry and husky. When they looked furtively at Jezebel, where she stood in their circle before the bed, she seemed but a black shadow, beyond which were fiery splashes of candle-flames; when they looked fearlessly over their nervous shoulders at the blackness of the far doorway, they did so in dread of seeing sudden gruesome graveyard horrors. So they sang the louder, the men hoarsely bawling the strange air and the women wailing it. But all the while they stood and held the sheet.

In the gloom stood Jezebel. She was very still. Holding the sheet, she too kept her eyes anxiously

upon the dark doorway, glancing now and again at the clock that ticked below the lamp at the far end of the long room. She was the only silent figure in the dingy place; but she saw to it that the singing never ceased.

Every precaution Jezebel had taken that the dead man's shadow should not take possession of his bed nor haunt his house. She had seen that Huckleback was buried in his Sunday clothes, that his body might rest content in the grave, and his soul not go down-at-heel and ashamed before his Maker—Jezebel having carefully beforehand cut out and sewn up all the pockets, lest his plaguing shadow - puppy should carry therein gravel and sand to throw at her windows at night, and otherwise give her annoyance. The heaviest stone slab that could be got she had caused to be laid upon the grave to keep down the shade of the departed rumstore-keeper from leaving the dead body ; indeed, Jezebel had bribed the stone-worker to uproot an ancient heavier slab that was the weatherbeaten headstone of an old officer of Nelson's, and, turning upside down the wholly-forgotten record of the old sea-dog's heroism, to carve in its stead, on the reverse side of the stone, an eulogy of the rumstore-keeper Huckleback ; this stone she had caused to be set upon the other that was already there. . . . And now on the third

night, as soon as the darkness had set in, she had gathered together her friends and intimates, as the custom is, and, shutting out the curious, they had slain a white kid and a white cockerel in the little yard at the back of the house, and, laying them down outside the door, and leaving beside the carcases rice and other daintier foods, with water and milk and Huckleback's favourite grog, mixed to his liking — being indeed the first time that Jezebel had ever prepared his cup with her own hands — they had then discreetly withdrawn from the place, and left the food for the dead, unspied upon. As the night advanced, they had entered the room and stood about the sheet, and sung wild dirges and dolorous hymns, and wailed with their might, and waked and kept watch for the coming of the shadow of the dead Huckleback. . . .

All the evening the watchers had feasted and drunk and sung; but Jezebel had touched no wine nor fervent liquors — she was keeping her brain clear. For once she had foregone sweet scents, and wore instead a charm of sour foul-smelling assafœtida to keep off the wraiths of the dead from coming near her. She had neglected no precaution, yet Jezebel was afraid. She knew, though she had put heavy tombstones upon his grave, that the earthbound shadow of this man, since the life had been violently taken from him,

might not rest in its sepulchre and pass away with the decent dissolution of his body, but must either take possession of the house in which he had died or for ever walk the graveyards or haunt some lonely place. She knew that Huckleback had been no lover of solitude — had always enjoyed good company — that he had a positive distaste for graveyards and nature and waste places — that he was passionately attached to his house. And she was uneasy. She looked back through the years, and she remembered that all the crafts and subtleties, magic and power, of the devil's sorceries to which she had lent herself could not bring the hair off the head of her first rival, the yellow girl of Briggs's — and what if the troubling shade of this dead man Huckleback should slip past her, elude her vigilance, evade her rites, and take possession of the house? —

The negro dirge stopped. A silence had fallen upon the singers.

Suddenly Jezebel's glorious voice rose clear in the opening phrases of the "*Nunc Dimittis*:" "*Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace,*" . . . she sang; and the great swelling throat gave out the words with wondrous volume and full meaning. The others stood there mute about the dim sheet, their dark faces turned towards Jezebel in the gloom, watching her with wonder-

ing eyes of praise as the beautiful words, rounded into mellow thrush-like notes, filled the room. . . . “*For mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.*” . . . The thrash of the music got into their blood, and when she took the first notes of the *Gloria*, the frightened hushed people all burst out into the psalm with a shout. . . . “*As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.*” Then “*Amen*” sang they all, and were still.

And again a heavy silence fell upon them.

The clock ticked distinctly in the room.

As the startling silence fell, there was that which made Jezebel’s wits freeze with terror — her brain reeled so that she nearly fell — the room and the dim figures in the room swam like black shadows upwards before her — as suddenly swept downwards below her feet, so that she nearly fell forward into the sheet. She tried to cry out, but her mouth and throat were dry and gave forth no sound — no whisper of a sound. The mute frightened people were staring at her with wide rounded eyes.

For though they all stood there perfectly still and held the sheet, they could hear in the room the heavy breathing of two men struggling as in a death-grip — a trampling of feet as of a rushing crowd — the flames of the candles blew aside and nearly went out as from the wind of people pass-

ing — a dull blow — the noise of a chair that fell — the heavy thud of a falling body — a sigh, and —

Suddenly the dark room was filled with a warm glow and a strange sweet smell — as of jasmine.

The clock purred hoarsely and slowly struck the hour.

Jezebel, her eyes staring and her mouth dropped horribly open, uttered a sudden shriek. Gray with terror, she pointed towards the door, and with dry-mouthed fear whispered :

“ Dar he is ! ”

The scared brown faces turned to where she pointed.

There in the black doorway was the rumstore-keeper Huckleback. He was dressed in his Sunday clothes, and he stood and looked at them all sadly. They saw him as a man sees his own shadow when it falls across still water, taking his earthly resemblance but showing also the things that are beyond.

The dead man sighed, and looking towards his bed stepped into the room.

A deafening shout burst from the throats of the startled watchers :

“ Dar he is ! ”

They swung up the waving sheet with a jerk; brought it down with a loud report; and beat it with their hands, screaming and yelling :

“Dar he is! — Hi! dar he is!”

“Turn him out!”

“Turn him out! — turn him out! — turn him out!”

“Hi! dar he is!”

The sheet snapped and crackled and flipped and boomed.

“Dar he is!”

The dark figures about it leaped and yelled:

“Git away! Hi! go ‘way!”

The sheet thundered and cracked and roared.

“Turn him out! Hi! turn him out!”

“Lef’ it! Lef’ it!! Lef’ it!!!”

The men’s voices bawled; the women shrieked; and they jumped and jigged and danced frantically, holding the ghostly sheet and madly slapping the taut surface with their open hands till it roared again, and, shaking it, screamed till they foamed at the mouth.

“Turn him out! — turn him out! — turn him out!”

They yelled in deafening din.

The shade of Huckleback hesitated — made as though to put his hands into his trousers’ pockets — sighed — shook his head sadly — and was gone.

The shouting stopped abruptly — there was sudden silence.

In the gloom a woman’s plaintive creole voice

cried the opening line of a dolorous hymn, and the rest that stood panting about the sheet caught up the tune and burst into the singing of it. A young negress laughed a shrill ghastly laugh—and laughed and laughed—and had to be led away. They were all shaking nervously—the strain of the long watching was beginning to tell.

Thus they sang hymns and wailed their uncouth dirges until daybreak.

As the night began to pale, and when they had eaten and drunk and refreshed themselves for the last time, Jezebel unlocked the door that led into the side-street, and the watchers, headed by Lazarus Goole, slipped quietly away.

When they were all gone Jezebel locked the door. She glanced her eyes over the empty cups and dishes and corkless bottles, and the scrappy relics of the feast of grief.

“Huh!” said she, “Lazarus Goole he’s got a monstrous early hiccup this mornin’—nevertheless he are a wonnerful hand wid hymn-tunes!”

She went through into the back-yard. The cold gray light of dawn was overcoming the smoky twilight. The dew-damp place was empty; the food and sacrifice had wholly vanished.

The next day being Sunday, Jezebel arrayed herself in a black silk gown that fitted very per-

fefully to her comely figure, put on rakishly a sombre much-befeathered hat, and at morning prayer she went and stood outside the parish church, with her face to the wall, and publicly abased herself. Then, kneeling on the steps that led up to the church door, she prettily thanked Heaven that it had been vouchsafed to her, miserable sinner and unworthy as she was, that the shadow of the dead man Huckleback should not take possession of her house.

The religious humiliation of Jezebel was one of her mightiest triumphs. That day the church was unusually empty of worshippers, whilst the overflow of kneeling penitents outside its doors was a very full one. For the splendour of Jezebel's humility infected those that came after her, arrayed in their brightest and best, and stayed their feet at the threshold of God's house, so that they kneeled in numbers outside the holy place and hesitated with unwonted diffidence to enter in.

Ordinary penitence — the beating their hands upon their bosoms, the putting their faces to the wall, and loud and public confession of their earthiness before the street — these things they knew; but it had not before been given to them to share the ritual of a gorgeous ceremonial of self-abasement with Jezebel Huckleback. Thus it came about that for a short season the glamour

of the public confession of sins got upon the town. . . .

Indeed, as the church-returning gossips on their way homewards sat down by the roadside beyond the town, the men tattling whilst the ladies took off their shoes and stockings to save them wear, they were agreed that they had not seen such a heap o' penitence buzzin' around the parish church since Shadrach Green the horse-dealer had left the Jews and got religion.

CHAPTER VIII

Wherein Lazarus Goole sees Things

ON the ninth night, Jezebel, and her friends with her, again gathered about the sheet in the ghostly gloom; and again standing there, like shadows amongst the shadows, through the dark hours they wailed and sang dirges and drank and feasted in the dimly-lighted common-room. For on the ninth night, when the arisen soul of the dead arrives in the high heavens and appears before God, where He sits on His judgment seat, the earthly shade that is called duppy may again at the death-hour make a last weak effort to take possession of its bed, unless driven out into lonely places to sigh into eternity, or back to the grave to slowly dissipate in silence and mystery with the flesh of the dead body of which it is the earth-bound shadow and uncorporeal semblance.

The death-hour came and went, and the fearful singers that watched and wailed about the sheet in the gloom of the flickering candle-light still chanted their dolorous threnodies; but the shade of Huckleback did not again return.

So with prayer and hymn and wondrous rites they thrust the rumstore-keeper Huckleback from his own threshold, and sent his restless shade a-packing, and his house knew him no more. . . .

After the death-hour had passed without a sign, a certain sense of relief took possession of the singers. Indeed, Lazarus Goole, the old sexton, became somewhat drunken and garrulous, and more than once showed an inclination to introduce an unseemly tone of levity into the solemn proceedings. Then, offended by the looks of shocked disapproval from the watchers, he grew quarrelsome. At last, when an African air was chanted, he was heard to sniff, and putting aside his usual habit of gentle compromise that so well became a man who has to bury all shades and opinions, he waxed arbitrary and dogmatic: from loudly-voiced dislike of graven images and idolatry he degenerated into openly expressed opposition to heresy, and finally endeavoured to interrupt, and then to talk down, all hymns that were not in *Ancient and Modern*. He even threatened in his abomination of heresy to withdraw altogether; and in fact proceeded eventually to do so in offended pride shortly after midnight on hearing Jezebel remark in a loud aside, perhaps somewhat indelicately, that he was a “blasted ijiot.”

Jezebel grimly unlocked the door into the side-

street and held it open, and the act, as much as his abomination of heresy, decided the sexton to carry out his threat to leave. He arranged himself in his clothes deliberately, and, looking round the room with severe dignity, after a halting effort to kiss his hand to Jezebel, limited in its full expression of sweetness by a hesitation as to the exact whereabouts of his mouth, he lurched out into the moonlight.

His hat was thrown out after him.

The door slammed behind him and was locked.

As the fresh air of the night smote him in the face it made Lazarus Goole's brain spin round; he felt the ground slipping away from him; he ran forward hard a few stumbling paces across the road to prevent the street going away, and fell with a rending hiccup into the narrow channel of the deep city gutter.

The old man gathered himself up in the dark, got on to all fours, and carefully sat himself down on the large flagstone that bridged the gutter—the running stream of the drain gently rippling over his booted feet. He sighed, and solemnly tried to brush the water off his wet clothes.

The sexton sat and pondered, then he addressed the empty street on heresy, the divine right of the Crown, and the infallibility of the upper clergy,

and confused religion with morality generally — indeed, Lazarus Goole was very drunk. Yet it is but bare justice to state that the sexton seldom became intoxicated, and even then not so much in his calling of sexton but rather in his lay capacity as bell-ringer and pew-opener; in point of fact it was a most unusual thing for him to drink fervent liquors at wakes, even on the ninth night — the grave-yard and his office seemed to weigh upon the sexton on these occasions; and when all's said, a man does not become very wholesomely light-hearted with a grave-shovel in his fist or the grave-dust in his socks — whereas at weddings his position was almost solely of a lay character, and he permitted himself to become exceedingly drunk. It will be seen that Lazarus Goole was a man of taste: he only committed sin when it was appropriate to the occasion; and even in his debaucheries he acted always with a proper sense of what was becoming to his calling — it was part of his self-discipline. It may be set down then that on this evening the sexton had fallen away, but his lapse was probably to be attributed, as the peace-making Mistress Stakker-pipe tried to show after his expulsion, to his deep affection for the dead man Huckleback. . . .

Lazarus Goole realised that he was drunk. And sitting on the cold flagstone he tried to get a grip

of the thinking part of him, hoping with an effort of will to overcome the weaknesses of his stomach. The fresh air that had at first driven the fumes into his head was now cooling his thumping temples, and the sickening swoonings of his brain were almost stilled. Underneath, too, the chill of the cold stone drew the fiery ferment from his blood at that end of his system. The moonlight was very peace-giving; and nothing contradicted him nor irritated. Sitting there, he definitely and unopposed established the damnable of heresy, proved the validity of holy orders, confirmed Henry the Eighth in the apostolic succession, blotted out any claim to salvation on the part of Rome or Dissent with a Christian ardour that outdid Rome, and became religiously satisfied. And he so knocked the bottom out of Jezebel's reputation that, in an access of garrulous benignity, he proceeded to restore to her some of the virtues of which she was entirely and peculiarly deficient. Then he concluded he might as well go home.

It may be said that this was the period of his extreme trial. Having put out his feet on to the road and got on all fours, he began badly by losing his hat into the gutter—but he was sufficiently sober to recognize frankly that if he went down after it he was lost. He sacrificed his hat. He got on to his legs, started walking rapidly, and

went off well; and though it was in a direction opposite to his desire, he calculated to turn when he had more room and a wider street; but the road began to go very slowly, so he started to run — he bore away to his left against all his inner urgings — saw the yawning black gutter coming nearer — wildly leaped it — and bounded against the shutters of a sleeping rum-store. He rallied, scrambled on to his feet, skipped back again across a friendly bridging stone-slab that spanned the gutter, and so again into the open roadway, and made off up the street. He now bore away to his right, rolled up against the premises of Wilberforce Gumme, tripped, and clutching wildly at a large notice-board that lay against the shutter, flung his arms about it, and, carrying it away with him, fell with a resounding clatter over the high doorstep — away went his feet — flinging up his heels he shot face downwards over the step, and brought up amongst some empty baskets and bottles and waste rubbish, where his head jammed in a corner, and his straying body settled to rest.

Wilberforce Gumme opened the jalousies on the floor above, and leaning over the verandah rails, thrust out a sleepy head swathed and bound in white cloths. He peered with irritable eyes down into the moonlit street.

“Who’s dar?” cried he.

Out of sight in the darkness below, Lazarus Goole's voice thickly answered that he couldn't sleep, and had come along to discuss Original Sin.

"Damn original sin!" said Wilberforce Gumme, and walking into the house shut his jalousies with a testy slam.

In the black shadow under the balcony, Lazarus Goole, now sitting on the ground somewhat gingerly amongst some broken bottles, considered the point, suspecting blasphemy. Then he gathered in his members, turned himself over, and got on to his feet.

"De chemist's a most ungodly man!" he said, and started to run again. . . .

By the time Lazarus Goole, missing his reckoning and his lodging, had arrived two or three miles outside the town, he was walking fairly steadily in the moonlight, doggedly bending all his faculties to keeping his stumbling feet with passable accuracy between the wheel tracks on the road. His black clothes were covered with the dust of many falls, as were his head and whiskers, but with a settled purpose in life his dignity had returned —

He was startled by a great white owl that wheeled past his face on noiseless wings.

The sexton halted.

He was standing in a flood of moonlight at the

lonely cross-roads near the green beyond the way-side rum-shop kept by Melissa's mother, the old widow Haplass. The tumble down shanty away behind him was long since shut up for the night and asleep, and showed but indistinctly, bathed like the rest of the world in the vague, weird, silvery light. But where the giant devil's-tree with mighty buttressed trunk and great outstretching branches stood in ghostly majesty by the roadside, Lazarus Goole saw that which sobered him.

On its great gaunt naked limbs, wide outspreading in the night haze, sat swarms of shadowy mischievous duppies, roosting together with sullen devilish jumbies, gibbering and mowing in the moonlight — that all looked down at him with sad green spectral eyes. And with them also sat ghoulish vampire loogaroos, that had put off their livid skins until the daybreak, leaving them at the foot of the tree, as it is ordained they shall before they may take upon themselves, for their own wicked purposes, the forms of earthly beasts and suchlike things ; and these sat huddled together along the branches, shivering with the cold, chattering their snaggy teeth and blinking in the moonlight, before getting off in a ball of blue flame to their evil devilmnts amongst the haunts of men, to suck the blood of those that sleep, and sap their strength, or flit about the burying-grounds

and grub up dead men's graves, and feed upon their dank corpses. About the foot of the tree on the red earth by its mighty roots there hunkered on their heels, amongst the cast-off skins of the loogaroos, the red-slobbering hags that steal little children in the dusk, and suck their blood and kill their souls — and these sat and munched their gums, and licked their cold and bloody lips, plotting the luring away of the little ones.

And in the gloom, by a great wooden buttress of the mighty trunk, stood the homeless shade of the dead rumstore-keeper Huckleback in sad and restless awkwardness — uneasy in his Sunday clothes, and uncomfortably lacking as to his breeches' pockets. . . .

As the sexton gazed — with staring eyes, and palsied limbs, and a cold sweat upon him, and fear that would not lift his feet — the shadowy beasts threw back their heads like wolves and sent up a howl to the moon ; then, of a sudden, from out a dark thicket beyond the great devil's-tree there rushed a Rolling Calf that thundered down upon the sexton, snorting hell-fire, and with fierce eyes aflame, and ugly horns poised low, and trampling of thundering iron hoofs and hissing swish of swinging tail — nearer and nearer it came, careering on, snorting and thundering, dragging a clanking chain that banged and rattled and bounced

along the road — and a great wind flew out from it as it went and blew up the dust in a cloud about it.

Lazarus Goole stood with stiff bent knees and ashen gray with fear — perfectly still. The blood thumped in his brains and thrashed in his ears ; but his will had lost its power and could not communicate with his extremities — his nerves were turned to water and conveyed to his members no message of his desire.

The hellish Thing came charging down on him. But still the sexton did not move. He knew that it must catch him unless he could gain the hill, up which it may not charge ; he knew that its blow, to be gored by it, the trampling of its iron hoofs, were death. He felt the shaking of the ground, the wind from its career, its furnace breath — down went its great head and the hideous levelled horns —

Suddenly the sexton's wits acted. He dashed aside, tripped over his feet, and fell — leaped up again —

And the Thing went crashing past him with a roar.

Then Lazarus Goole ran. With his coat-tails flying out behind him, he made for the lane that runs up the hillside. . . .

When the market people found Lazarus Goole in the early morning, lying, with the dew, in the ditch at the foot of the hill, he seemed somewhat dazed. He explained that he had been unable to sleep and had taken a walk; then he became very serious and hinted that he had seen things. He drowsed off again in the ditch; so they roused him from his heaviness and put him on an ass and brought him to his lodging in the town. . . .

The laughing sceptics were full of gay winks and jerkings of mocking thumbs over shrugging shoulders; and indeed concerning the rollin' cyalf I am inclined to question the quality of the sexton's liquor. Lazarus Goole, like any other man, would of course try to account naturally for being found sleeping in a ditch. But the shade of Huckleback has often since been seen by others besides Lazarus Goole as he returned late that night from the waking of the dead; and there are things that a man must take on trust by word of mouth—such as immortality and his paternity. . . .

Of a moonlight night, as the last village loiterer, wiping his mouth, leaves the widow Haplass's counter; when plain and hillside are flooded with mysterious silvery light; when the great devil's-tree hard by (that in the daytime commonplace folk call *silk-cotton-tree*, and word-distorting professors *Bombax ceiba*) at the mystic touch of

the wizard moon loses its rugged earthly pomp and grandeur of reality and turns to unreal magnificence of mighty ghostliness ; when the fantastic pinguin-cactus thrusts up its sore-wounding long lank fingers into the eyes of the violet night ; when the night-flowers open to the moon, and unsubstantial tree and bush and bramble burst into eery blossom of climbing weeds that hang in tangle of trailing wreaths and slim festoons, making a fragrant garden of ghostly flowers that have no bloom by day ; when the tobacco holds up its milk-white stars to the winking stars of the purple firmament and fills the dewy air with sweetest scent ; when ghosts walk, and the stealthy goat goes a-tip-toe at his evening meal along the lanes, and the gaunt black hog is grubbing abroad and hoking with unclean snout in the graveyards ; when the bull-frog croaks, cicada whirrs, and the purple spice-laden night throbs with myriad insects' rustle and chirrup and shrill pipe ; when the white owl flits on silent wings, and nightjar darts hawk-like in short swift flights along the path ; when dark mango grove and lofty solitary palm, slender tree-fern, and waving fields of sugarcane turn to dream-things in the lilac night haze ; when bush and brake and thicket sparkle with flashing fireflies that are the living jewels of the jungle's midnight diadem, and in the dark covers the

cucuya beetle twinkles its tiny lamp; when all the world changes its shape and atmosphere in fairy homage to the moon — then, as a man sees his face in a pitcher of water, so the shade of Huckleback may sometimes be seen peering through the gaunt upright cactus shafts of the pinguin hedges, or flitting along the lonely road, or haunting the bamboo thickets: he bears a bloody wound upon his breast, and he sighs and is sad, for, save his Sunday clothes, they have filched from him all that he had, his house, his bed, his very resting-place — left him not even his empty pockets.

Indeed, there are few in the village but have felt the wraith of the dead Huckleback flit by them on the road; for though as you pass along the green the night be perfumed with fragrant odours, you shall yet suddenly feel the air filled with a stronger strange sweet scent — the hot breath of the dead rumstore-keeper as he passes by your elbow in the lane.

After Jezebel had worn her weeds for nine days she wearied of her mourning, and thinking it unbecoming, she put it off and went into magenta.

**IN THE HOUSE
OF BITTERNESS**



CHAPTER IX

Wherein Boaz Bryan's family Timepiece runs down

THE twilight was passing to darker dusk in the bare and ill-smelling streets of Port Royal. All the dingy little world lay robed in hazy umber. Afar in the empty dust-gray heavens a slim white moon hung diffidently.

In one of the meanest thoroughfares, there lay scattered about in the darkening roadway, outside one of the ramshackle wooden houses, the greater part of the lighter furnishings of its interior. In the midst of the disorder, on a stool, ghostlike, sat Bryan's comrade Masheen Dyle. He was in his blue shirt-sleeves, and was looking sentimentally at a gaudy wooden clock, of the gimcrack make and much-tinselled design, that lay across his knees. His fat cur the Cuckoo, dimly white, was furtively flitting about amongst the wreckage, making the best of affairs by absorbing into his inner dog all stray refreshment that came within his range.

Dyle looked up as my footfall broke the silence of the street, and, recognizing me, he carefully put down the clock, rose, clicked his heels together, and saluted.

A wild blood-curdling wail, issuing from the open window of the house, pulsed upon the air, and died away. Dyle stood grimly at attention in the dusk, and made no sign that he had heard it.

I stopped.

"What are you doing here, Dyle?" said I.

"I is givin' a hand to take back de furniture into Boaz Bryan he's family premises, sah," said he; and he coughed embarrassedly.

"Indeed? And what's that noise in there?" I asked.

Dyle smiled grimly:

"Mrs. Boaz Bryan a-yellin' victory," said he.

"Ho-ho?" queried I.

"Dat so, sah." He cleared his throat, jumped his knee nervously, and prepared with relish to explain. I signed to him to be seated. He sat down, took up the clock, placed it tenderly on his lap again, and continued in a hushed voice:

"De fact o' de matter are dis here, sah. Dar are a time comes to folks when dey ought to be givin' up courtin' and gallivantin' and playin' de blamed goat around. Dat time it's just about hit up dis considerable while wid Boaz Bryan. . . . De widow Jezebel Huckleback she's been stoppin' wid de p'lice-sergint's family down here in Port Royal dese three days; and Boaz Bryan he's been livin' on locusts and wild honey and dem

sort o' rich meats most o' de time, wastin' he's substance in riotous livin', and not walkin' too much in de way of de Lord—jest de same like King David used to got buzzin' around Judæa arter other folks' wives and permiscuous females—”

“ Yes, yes, Dyle. Never mind ancient history.”

“ Yes, sah. Now it come'd to pass de old widow Tiffles she j'ined de family picnic dis arternoon—and dey has been a kind of permiscuous hallellooyah and gineral rip-up goin' on since de time de ole lady come'd on to de premises. Boaz Bryan he done gone absent without leave since de sun gone'd down, wanderin' around in de buryin'-grounds worryin' he's wool about circumstances—and de both de two ladies deirselves, reckonin' Mrs. Boaz and de widow Tiffles, is inside o' de house floppin' around in de easy chairs. Mrs. Boaz she's in Boaz he's own rocking-chair, and de widow Tiffles she's in de spare visitor's chair, sah—de one wid de leg-rests—no other chair in dis town big enough for de ole creature dis evenin'. Dey is both lyin' around kind o' loose and rent in twain, wid a stroke o' de high-strikes, sah. Leastaway dis minute ago; but it 'pears to me dey is simmerin' down to coolin' again, only lettin' dem wailin' sounds out o' deir insides just sort of

irreg'lar, sah, to let de neighbours know dey is in possession o' de front parlour and got de winnin' hand."

He lugged a soiled handkerchief out of his baggy breeches' pocket, and wiped the face of the clock, breathing on the cracked glass to moisten it.

"Just befo' de sun gone'd down I was kind o' loafin' around and hangin' about when I see'd de fam'ly belongin's boomin' out o' de winders o' de premises, and I judged dar war a high wind in de district, so I kep' on loafin' around and hangin' about till der screechin' stop'd and de crowd dat was in de street thinn'd out and gotted off to deir vittles. Arter-a-whiles, when de street war mostly empty, I call'd in, like I war jest droppin' in friendly to ask arter de health o' de fam'ly, and offered to take a hand wid de sweepin' and garnishin' de mansion. . . . Dey was both of dem in de moanin' fits by dis time. Mrs. Boaz she say'd nothin'; only roll she's eyes at me like she was a skeer'd hen; but de ole mother she rock'd she's face side to side, and den she take'd she's body full o' breath, and she throw'd back she's head and let a yell out o' she, till I think'd de strong inside de Lord fixed into she ought to' a busted. Howsomever, I see'd argiment are not de point, so I take'd off me jacket and put it over de ole creature's head like she war one o' dey gray parrots in

one o' dey fancy cages ; and I's takin' in de furniture into de premises lone-handed — exceppin' de balance, which are here yet."

He looked at the litter of cheap ornaments ruefully.

A wail like the bay of a desolate dog filled the pause. The Cuckoo stopped grubbing, held up his nose, sniffed the air, and sneezed — then got back to his grubbing. Masheen looked over his shoulder stealthily, and continued, in a still more lowered voice :

" Dat's de mother, sah — Mrs. Boaz she gits de style from de mother, mostly."

He looked cautiously round ; got up ; and brought his stool nearer. " Mrs. Boaz," he confided in a hushed voice, " she are a fine woman, sah, a blamed fine woman ; but she are kind o' short in de temper. Dat so. Some folks' tempers dey takes dem one way ; some folks' tempers dey takes dem anudder way. It's de Lord's will. Mrs. Boaz Bryan when she gits one o' dese here fits on her, first she prowls around and sharpens she's claws on de family furniture like she was a tom-cat, wid a preference for de glassware — it appears almost like it give'd Deborah Bryan comfort in she's interiors mashin' up de chinaware — den she rolls she's eye and stamp 'em foot, and whoops around, and gits for Bryan's wool. I done

always notice on dem occasions whensoever de widow Tiffles comes along for a talk wid she's daughter de two of dem mostly always gits to comparin' guard-reports concernin' Boaz Bryan and he's carryin's-on, and when dey is a case to go before a jury, den dey kind o' suddenly rips up cantankerous togedder — and den it are just like a sort of a stoopenjous hurrycane done got loose. Dey is no arguin' round a hurrycane. And de languidge ! my honey gracious ! for a swear, de ajootant o' dis regiment are no mean man ; but up agin de widow Tiffles de ajootant are just de same like a li'l chile."

He stooped forward, breathed on the glass face of the battered clock, rubbed it slowly with his sleeve, and sighed :

"I give'd dat piece of ware to Boaz Bryan de evenin' he war married, sah ; but de works done gone out ob joint — "

He held it near his ear and shook it carefully. There was an answering dull thump from the disordered works within.

Dyle sighed heavily and put back the clock on his lap.

"She war de sassiest gal in de show in dem times," said he. "One time I very near marry she meself; but, t'ank God, Boaz Bryan he war always de most enterprisin' and keerless of de two.

De women, sah, likes de genelmen enterprisin' and keerless best — women accounts dem things above natchural talents and edicashun. Dat's de fact; and dey is no gettin' round facts. Facts is just de same like prison-rations — dey lies mighty dry and heavy on de stomach, but yo' has got to swallow 'em or yo' has got to leave 'em alone and git along on a empty institution."

"Yes, yes, there's no getting round facts — or the stomach, Dyle; but — "

"Yes, sah; I reckon I's gittin' outside de argiment. Point o' fact, Mrs. Boaz Bryan she are kind o' sudden in de temper — 'specially when Boaz Bryan he's been rollin' he's eyes at promisc'ous females and talkin' free and pooty to dem, sah — more 'specially dat dangerous widow Huckleback. And dat Jezebel Huckleback, when she's been humming around and walkin' de town on de arm of Boaz Bryan and playin' de tom-fool ginerally, nothin' satisfy she but she must come around squarin' she's shoulders and shakin' she's bustle at Boaz Bryan's lawful wife — she are dat small-minded and p'isonous — puttin' on dat amount of style, and waggin' she's behime that consider'ble yo'd think she war de wife of He's Excellency de Gub'nor o' de Colony. When a female is likewise a widder she don't got no biz'-ness takin' de arm round de town of a lawful

married man. Dar are no respec'able sample of dat in Holy Writ. It are not de square thing. Howsoever, I don't rightly calculate to unnerstand how dese things come'd to Deborah Bryan's comprehensions, sah ; but I reckon it all come'd round in de natchural order of things. A passel of no-account niggers gits sittin' togedder, talkin' a heap ob onchristian personal circumstances about deir neighbours — one thing leadin' on to anudder, till dey done got all dey has to say off of deir minds ; den dey gits off round to de neighbours and whispers all de circumstances de other folks tell'd 'em and a heap more de other folks *don't* tell'd 'em. Den all de folks in de parish gits to talkin' o' de circumstances — den it comes round to de widow Tiffles — den de widow Tiffles she gits to whisperin' wid Mrs. Boaz Bryan — den in places whar dey sing here followeth de anthem. Peradventure it done happen'd dat way — and, den again, peradventure it don't happen'd dat way. Howsoever, when I see'd de dangerous widder Huckleback she was stoppin' down here in dese parts wid she's friend de wife of de p'lice-sargint ; when I recollect' de p'lice-sargint he-self are a sleepy oninterestin' or'nary kind o' feller ; when I come'd up agin Jezebel Huckleback about sundown and seed she been buzzin' round de town in she's ball-clothes ; when I met up wid de widow

Tiffles sneakin' along and makin' for Boaz Bryan's fam'ly premises — den I scratched me wool and whistle'd to meself — I sort o' suspicion'd dar was somethin' cu'ious goin' to happen. Yes, sah ; and when I see'd Boaz Bryan struttin' around de town and kickin' out he's legs on de top of de other symptoms, den I know'd dey was things *bound* to happen. Boaz Bryan he are one o' dem cu'ious sort of creatures, de most or'nary female she's only got to waggle she's skirts at he and he gits dat plumb distracted wid heself it seem like he was bound to wash he's face and git into he's Sunday clothes and git bustlin' round de town committin' adultery. I don't goin' to blame de feller for havin' he's proper feelin's — a gentleman ain't allers bound to keep down he's feelin's inside of he. Dat not natural. I ax yo' what done God Almighty give'd he he's feelin's for exceppin' for to use 'em ? But Boaz Bryan he's mostly nothin' *exceppin'* feelin's most o' de time. Huh ! de feller don't even got de sense to keep he's mouth shut in he's sleep — but it 'peers he done take'd to playin' de ijiot-mule in he's sommambulations, and mumblin' 'Jezebel' and 'beautiful widder' and such. Huh ! dat not de correct and proper circumstance for a married man dat's wife is named Deborah. Dat a fact. He's jest been actin' scand'lous most o' de time — and when he not

actin' scand'lous it are because he are tired from de last foolishness. . . . I don't recollect' de beginning of de bust-up exackly — things seem like they done got sort o' mixed up and tangled togeder in me remembrance — but de females in de next premises dey see'd de circumstances some-thin' dis-a-way : Boaz Bryan, after he been foolin' around most of de afternoon wid dis here Jezebel female, by'm-by he begin'd to feel de want of he's vittles monstrous bad — so den he done got to sottle he's mind to gittin' off to home. When Boaz come'd into de end of he's street he met up wid Mrs. Absolom Stakkerpipe. 'Good-day to yo', Boaz Bryan !' says she. 'Good-day to yo', sister Stakkerpipe,' says Boaz Bryan. Den he stopped and take'd she's hand and give'd it a kind o' soft squeeze, and he says, says he : 'Yo' appears like yo' isn't lookin' too spry, sister Stakkerpipe,' says he. Mrs. Stakkerpipe she let Boaz Bryan hold she's hand and she says, says she : 'I hasn't got too good news, Boaz Bryan, for true,' says she. And Boaz he squeezed she's hand some more, and he says, says he : 'I was calculatin' yo' has not gotted too good news,' says he. Mrs. Stakkerpipe she says, says she : 'Huh-huh ! Boaz Bryan, ole friend,' says she, 'yo' is wastin' yo'r emotions on me,' says she ; 'for meself I is toller-ble, but I has got de bad news for yo' — de widow

Tiffles she's come across't de water to sotte down wid yo'r fam'ly for de evenin', says Mrs. Stakker-pipe, says she. Dat news shut Boaz Bryan's stomach — he don't got no hankerin' arter he's vittles any more. Boaz Bryan he don't got too easily turned off of he's vittles — but he don't calculated on de widow Tiffles. He done clean forgotton to give Mrs. Stakkerpipe good-day ; he done jest lef' go of she's hand and done git saunterin' along agin, more or less cogitatin', like he was thinkin' about things. . . . Arter-a-whiles he come'd to he's family-premises. Things inside appears mighty quiet and solemn. De suspicion of misery done gotted on to Boaz Bryan's innards. He take'd a heap o' time wipin' he's feet on to de doorstep, though dey was only dust on 'em ; howsoever, he know'd dat behind of de jalousies in all de windows around in de neighbourhood de eyes of de whole street was on him. Wid dat he girded up he's loins and trampled into de house. He open'd de parlour door, and he walked in kind o' friendly and cheerful. De widow Tiffles she war in de easy chair wid de leg-rests, and Mrs. Boaz Bryan she war in de rockin' chair — and dey both say'd nothin'. Boaz Bryan he sottled down on to de chair underneath de open window, and he fanned heself wid he's pocket-handkerchief like he feel'd kind o' perspiry all on a sudden —

and de both de two females dey kep on settin' quiet. . . . Huh! dat show de born tomfoolishness of de feller — he *see'd* dey was gineral inflammation sot up on de premises, and he ought to kep' next de door. Howsoever, he wiped he's head wid he's pocket-handkerchief and purtended he don't notice de females is not too gay in deir spirits. Den he giv'd a easy sort of laugh. 'How yo' is, mudder-in-law; how yo' is?' says he, kind o' friendly, and mo' or less familiar and full o' family style. . . . 'Toller'ble, my son, toller'ble,' says mudder-in-law, sort o' stoney and low down in she's stomach; and den she giv'd one o' dem dry coughs — 'toller'ble,' says she, scowlin' at he, and breathin' hard. Deborah Bryan she say'd nothin'. Boaz Bryan he feel'd dat circumstances was sottlin' down to consternation; nevertheless he reckoned he was bound to play de agree'ble. 'Has de gran'chilluns been behavin' toller'ble?' says he. De widow Tiffles she don't say'd nothin'. Boaz he see'd it was mighty important dar was no hesitations allowed to get into de conversation; so he ax'd Mrs. Boaz how she's symptoms was prosperin'. Mrs. Boaz she say'd nothin'. Den de two women dey both shake'd deir heads mighty solemn. Den dey looked at Boaz Bryan, and agin dey both shake'd deir heads mighty solemn. It appeared like dar was too much fam'ly news

buzzin' round. Boaz Bryan he wiped de perspiration off he's head, and he says, says he, 'I reckon dis been first-class weather for sailin' across de water, mudder-in-law,' says he, 'though de schoolmaster he been tellin' me dey is a racketty heap of oneasy prognostications gittin' up in de increased fluidity of de atmosphere, and de weathercocks appears like dey was oncertain in deir emotions. I is a-feared dey is a hurrycane loafin' around.' Wid dat he give'd a sigh. De widow Tiffles she smiled one o' dem long smiles all a-one-side of she's mouth, and den she laugh'd kind er husky and quiet: 'O yes,' says she, 'dey is a hurrycane a-comin', sure 'nough,' says she. Deborah Bryan she fetched a hoarse-laugh, kind o' sarcastic-like. Nobody say'd nothin'. Dar was a long time pass. Things was gettin' kind of oneasy. Boaz Bryan he reco'nised he make'd a mistake interjoocin' de hurrycane; and he kep' on worryin' he's wool, a-settin' dar breathin' hard, turnin' he's mind around, tryin' to riz points for argument, and chokin' down he's curses. Arter-a-whiles he says, says he, sort o' calm-like and pert, says he: 'I is sorry I was not on de premises to give yo' welcome and how-yo'-is, mudder-in-law — but, point-o'-fact, I has been round de corner wid ole man Elias Chudgrew, and we done git to talkin' permisc'ous recollections, and de time

pass — I allers notice de time pass mighty quick when yo' gits into yo'r neighbour's rockin' chair wid yo'r heels on de winder-sill. D'clare to gracious, I think I'd 'a been dar now, forgettin' me responsibilities, only ole man Chudgrew he seems to forgotted whar he keeps de rum-bottle and de tobaccy since he done got joined together in holy matrimony, dat a fact! — dat de way holy matrimony takes some folks. Elias Chudgrew he don't never ask'd me has I a mouth on me; by consequence of which I grow'd mo' or less tired of rememberin' ole times — and so I drapped off to home for me vittles. But I never expeck' de pleasure of de company of de widow Tiffles wid me tea.' Wid dat he spitted out o' de window, sort o' casual and friendly, like he was feelin' at home. De widow Tiffles she sot still and she don't say'd nothin'. Deborah Bryan *she* sot still and *she* don't say'd nothin'. Boaz Bryan *he* sot still and *he* don't say'd nothin'. And dey all sot and study some more. . . . Arter-a-whiles Deborah Bryan she give'd one o' dem long yellin' cries. . . . Boaz Bryan he swallowed a gulp, kind o' dry, in he's throat. . . . Den de widow Tiffles she begin'd to grit she's gums, and she's eyes done git a-rollin' and a-glarin'. Den Boaz Bryan he done got up on he's behime feet and shaked out he's legs sort of easy, and stretched himself, like he

come'd to de conclusions dat dar was de end of de argiment ; but Deborah Bryan she take'd a long breath, and give'd a shudder, and let a squall out of she, fit to bust de windows. Boaz Bryan he sot down again, sort o' sudden, and jest kep' he's eyes on circumstances. . . . De ole widow Tiffles she kep' on chewin' she's gums, breathin' hard and quick, snorkin' and keepin' she's eyes fixed on Boaz Bryan. Den Deborah Bryan she git to talkin' and mumblin' to sheself, and growlin' and mutterin'. Arter-a-whiles, de widow Tiffles she says, says she : 'Boaz Bryan,' says she, speakin' kind o' solemn, like de preacher when he's goin' to riz a subscription, 'Boaz Bryan,' says she, 'we is taught to rejoice over one sinner dat repenteth — but dar is nothin' in Holy Writ agin pullin' de wool out of a sinner dat don't got started in wid repentin'. Boaz Bryan he allow'd to heself dat he done'd a heap o' repentin' in he's time, nevertheless he say'd nothin.' De widow Tiffles chewed she's gums some more, den she fetched a cackle like she war a settin' hen quittin' settin': 'Boaz Bryan, yo'r time is precious — Hell is yawnin' for de damned !' says she. . . . Boaz he wasn't goin' to dispute dat. Disputin' is only rilin' to de feelin's. Disputin' don't git folks what dey wants. I ax yo', sah, done disputin' make a hen lay eggs ? — done disputin' git de eggs when de hen done laid

'em? Boaz Bryan he reckons to unnerstand more about playin'-cards dan de gospel. . . . Den de widow Tiffles she fetched another o' dem cackles: 'De time is short! Prepare ye de way,' says she; 'Hell is yawning for de damned!' says she. . . . Boaz Bryan he recognized he see'd dese prognostications befo'. He know'd whar he was standin' de moment de business done got down to de point of religion. He allowed to heself dar war nothin' lef' for he exceppin' repentance and de confession of sins, or shinnin' out of de parlour window. All of a sudden — bim! — blop! — blam! — Deborah Bryan she lep'd up out o' she's chair; den she stamp 'em foot and roll 'em eye and git on to she's toes and lep'd again — a-glarin' and a-mumblin'. An den she come'd along at Boaz Bryan a-clawin' de air, a-rippin' and a-snortin' and a-catterwhoopin'! Boaz Bryan he riz'd up and make'd for a shin out o' de parlour window, but de ole mother she up quick and girded up she's loins and gripped a-holt of de family-timepiece and clipped he on de left jaw. . . . Honey gracious! dar are a chunk o' skin outeren o' de side o' Boaz Bryan's jaw dis evenin' dat seems like it war goin' to prevent de wool growin' in dat partic'lar whisker dis passel o' Sundays. Boaz Bryan he done clean forgot de Scriptures dat time, sartin sure; I reckon he don't never stopped to hold out de other cheek, but he

just lep'd through de window and lifted he's heels
and travelled for de open country. And now—
he's havin' he's smoke, kind o' solemn, a-settin'
on a tombstone in de buryin'-ground. Tomb-
stones"— he added absently—"tombstones is
kind o' coolin' and soothin' wid Boaz Bryan—"

Dyle paused, and sighed heavily. Then, rising
slowly, he said with some embarrassment :

"And beggin' yo'r leave, sah, I is goin' to fin-
ish puttin' de balance of me friend Boaz Bryan's
house in order agin he's comin' home, same like
de prodigal son, wid he's belly full o' husks and
bilin' over wid repentance."

He saluted with dignity ; and I, feeling that I
had been gently dismissed, stepped into the dusk,
and, walking down the silent street, turned into
the fœtid public square. The deserted square of
Port Royal ! that in a more riotous past had been
one of the world's great marts, but is now fallen
into a barren place enough, where even the weeds
scarce will to grow — the busy hum of people al-
together departed from it, except for an hour or
so of a Sunday, when, in the quaint old-world
church whose bare white wall flanks the square,
the organ booms at matins and even song, and the
singing worshippers in raucous religious rivalry
essay to outdo its wheezing harmonies. Yet here
was ground that had once been choked with rich

merchandise ; here had aforetime been more serious to-do than mere singing of psalms of a Sunday. This mute empty place had in a more strenuous age echoed to the wrangle of swarms of busy traders, the roar of a great traffic, the ringing peals of church bells, the clatter of soldiery. Here in her rude beginnings, when men and women wore quaint garments of strange cut, and with mellifluent accent of Spain, using much elaborate courtesy and don and signorita one to the other, took the name of the Lord their Christ in vain in pompous overzeal to give Him praise, and built cathedrals in His honour, burning indeed and disembowelling and putting to foul Christian torture in pharisaic arrogance of only revealed religion those that would not join praise with them in exact like fashion — in this so tragic time of theologic hellishnesses some Spaniard fellow of the rakehell crew had set out with foreign line and plummet the four right sides and angles of the empty place, raising defensive rampart and parapet towards the sea, with church at end, and living-houses of Southern whitewashed walls on the two further sides, and well of water in the centre of the levelled square — set it out, destiny deciding, for the doing of some worship and more deviltry.

Here had tramped reckless privateersman, here

swaggered bloodstained buccaneer — their high-pooped craft crowding the harbour with captured lordly galleons at their windowed sterns, and pouring out on to the wharves and quays rich spoil snatched from the Spaniard, making Port Royal “richest spot in the universe.” Here had they trod, curly-wigged clumsy-coated baggy-breeches’d big-booted men from everywhere, and there would be questionable ruffians amongst them too — sinister-looking fellows with little gold rings in their ears and ugly scars about their swarthy jowls, and here and there one of them wanting as to a limb, and wearing clothes jauntily that fitted them but ill, being indeed most obviously designed for others, and spending in riot and debauch and drunken orgy strange gold pieces that they had not possessed if every man had had his own. Yonder would be an ugly seafaring fellow — he with the black patch over his eye — getting together with much whispering a villainous cut-throat crew for some unlovely devilments upon the high seas. Here had swarmed low-class Jew and merchant, bully and jezebel, and all the vulture-crew and noisome jackal-pack that batten on ill-gotten riches, craftily gathering-in the treasure so questionably come by, so lightly parted with in wild carouse and reckless gamble by buccaneer and fighting-man and spendthrift hands that gathered it in violence.

Thus had Port Royal come to fame of wondrous infamy, and greatness of riches, and envy of the nations — sitting at the water's edge, like an armed cut-throat, by the high road between the world and Spain. So, at the Royal Gate, made golden with the dowry of the seas, poured on to her wharves from multitudinous captures, they are grown used to choirs chanting hymns of praise, church bells sounding triumphant peals, taverns making merry over glorious victories with much shout of carouse and frantic merriment, governors penning official despatch, taking not all the credit but formally and in some modest degree thankful to Providence — when, at a half-hour before the stroke of midday on a fine morning in June, of a sudden the earth quaked and the riven ground gaped with sickening upheaval, and sank under the waters, swallowing the fabulous wealth of the sixteen-hundreds from Port Royal, blotting out the three thousand houses of the ancient town save two hundred, and choking the harbour with floating bodies of the unburied dead, whose stench of death swept the island with the plague — so that the old taverns brawl no longer, and old Spanish churches chant now no hymns of praise, nor peal their bells for prayer or victory, but may be seen, weather permitting, to this day, deep down below the clear waters. . . . So the hidden

hand of doom, obeying the clean law of order, struck down at a blow this evil thieves'-kitchen of the seas.

Here had stepped the English vikings of the French wars—here had tramped the pigtailed seamen from the king's ships, crews speaking every dialect from Kent to Old Virginia; here had they lurched and rolled and taken their ease, with much hitching of belted breeches, and swearing of ponderous oaths that had not been outdone by the army in Flanders—masterful folk with weatherbeaten skins that the salt of salt waters had tanned and might not further sting or smart—men with keen watchful eyes, as became a people who ruled the high seas and to whom the nations dipped their pennants in homage upon the waters—seamen these who fought by no overdainty rule or measure, but left the spelling of elaborate theories to the schoolmasters, and laid themselves alongside an enemy's ship whenever found, and looked to plain drubbing of the foreign rogues as the prime principle of war. Bloodshed they took to be dirty work, so they did not seek it; but when it had to be done they wore no pinafores to do it, nor wrote they madrigals in praise of it to show it beautiful, but they looked it sternly in the face like men, and did it as near like gentlemen as war may be done, honouring

not war but those that waged it in seemly wise — and when the foe struck, sparing the enemy and mitigating his humiliation. Here had strutted noble and fop in silk and satin and jewel-hilted sword, with brilliant beauties from across the water at Spanishtown, most splendid viceregal court of the seventeen-hundreds and Regency — lordly governors too taking a stroll in intervals of bitter quarrels with angry Assemblies. Here had been heard the tap of the auctioneer's mallet as he hammered down to the highest bidders the last consignment of negroes. Here had trudged bloody pirate, bound and in chains, sorry hero of the Black Roger, about to step the dance of death without a toe-board under the gallows-tree up harbour — caught with his murderous crew in yonder rakish black craft that, flying her black flag with white skull and crossbones, had come skimming over from Cuba hovering hawk-like along the sea-track of the great-hulled West India merchantmen. Here had passed the hangdog slaver to his like doom, the poor rogue's sullen eyes likely enough paying but slight heed to the great volumes of smoke belching from the settling black hull of the captured slave-ship in the harbour, as she burnt in shame to the water's edge — eyes straying more likely nervously eastwards towards the swamps at Gallows Point, where, up against

the sky, the bound bodies of cut-throat crews were swinging in their chains, hanging by the neck from the thick-set gibbets — leafless gallows-trees that brought the black vultures swarming to the plucking of the baneful fruit in the Orchard of the King.

Here had strutted loose women, light o' love, in rich array, displaying immodestly the allurements of their bodies, with wandering eye on every man and any man ; gleaning a loathsome harvest ; garnering of money feverishly, knowing that theirs was a short-lived traffic that was founded on the fleeting beauty of their flesh ; yet winning it only to fling it away as lightly as they gathered it, having indeed no cleanly self-respect to provide for, no nook in the world to call their own, no mate to build for, but only a feverish to-day to be fulfilled — blotted out ; knowing no gentle care ; the vulgar plaything of the brutish many ; loved by none ; realizing their womanhood never ; their sweetest function dissipated, even motherhood unsought for — bringing shame ; knowing no cleaner sentiment than base and shameless ecstasies ; the most sacred secrets of their tender bodies the common jest of the market-place ; moved to their sorry way of life by a maggot i' the brain — the itch of inordinate appetite ; stepping their fantastic dance of life to a frenzied measure, thereby

rushing the more speedily to that dreaded time when they should have become the haggard victims of their own desires ; their only prospect to gaze with wide-eyed fear from a frantic present to a wan-eyed future ; living the hysterical delirium of their nightmare lives extravagantly, and, their crazy folly done, dying alone, without a loving hand to moisten the lips, parched with the burning thirst of coming death, or to close their once roving eyes, staring upwards, pathetically wide open now, fixed in their last bold stare — dying shamefully in some drunken tavern brawl, or mayhap, worse still, spared by grinning cynic death, losing inevitably early the last shreds of comeliness, their only marketable commodity, and sinking into long penurious neglect, dying unintended in some dingy corner in deserted unreverenced old age, to be flung unwept for into a dunghill grave. Poor little souls ! so had they lived ; so had they lain them down and died — their last sighs going to add to the ineffectual voice of experience to which will not listen generation after generation of the madcap women whose feet shuffle invitation in the street — gone to fulfil the futile grief which is for ever passing and has for ever passed ineffectually into the unheeded moan of the four winds of the earth.

Indeed, those were roaring times, when it was

not only difficult for a man to come to his own but to keep it when he had come to it, when the stout burgess wore his sword on his hip and his pistol in his belt like the most needy swashbuckler, though he had been hard put to it maybe to make right use of them in emergency; and the richer he grew and the nearer approached the time when he might purchase nobility, so much the more anxious became he. Nor did the departing sunlight mark the end of his day: in truth, the rich man slept upon an uneasy pillow, and the light sleeper slept but ill, for the teeming place would keep up its racket late into the night, a time torn with much uproar of noisy brawls—bloodstained brawls often enough—uproar dying out only in the small hours with the coarse shout of the last drunken debauchee reeling homewards, sottishly uncertain of his place of lodgment.

But this, the theatre of their noisy deeds, was now deserted, given up to silence and the dusk—the tawdry scenery faded; the background houses grown dingy and decayed: the stage empty of the picturesque throng that, sword on hip or fluttering fan in hand, patched, powdered, and painted for their several parts, had paced or skulked or strutted across its boards—its drama fallen out of fashion, resolved into stray episodes writ but indolently on the blurred tablets of forgetful memories.

Its noisy magnificence unrecorded. The srip of its acts and scenes torn from the bindings and scattered to the winds of inaccurate tradition — its cues lost — its most tragic sentences cut out — its comic passages forgot. The players — vanished amongst the tombs, their windy mouthing spoken and done, their deeds of deering-do as lightly banished as their most blackest infamies — the gossip-tales of all they did, their loves, their little jealousies, their piques and wrangles and their crimes, their genial kindnesses, heroic sacrifices — all put away — grown as dusty as their scattered mouldering properties. Of the old play no whisper now — no broken fragments of its spoken lines. The lip-told inaccurate traditions of its mightiest names meeting with a shrug of the shoulder — its heroics passing into doubt — the very evil of its ill repute put to the question — ay, the ghosts of its one-time greatness passing into nothingness, as though the things they shadowed had never been. The curtain rung down — the music, brass and wood and string, that played to their dancing, silenced. The musicians mute — their fallen chaps unable now to sound a note for all their accurate practice of deft blowing. The empty stage given over to Nature — infinite mysterious Nature smiling over all, kindly indulgent to our little finite schemes of immortality, know-

ing in her vast experience that, whatever else is uncertain, old age and death and the passing of things and profound Oblivion are sure, and everlasting rest — the vagrant wind, the voice of Nature, sighing through its rifts and rents, and playing amongst them as on a plaintive lute, sighing and laughing lightly in and out its forsaken hollows and broken places — Nature with her artist hand decently covering in a more fitting elderly gray habit the once violent colour scheme of its ancient magnificence.

There was now only a solitary negro stripling in the twilit square; he was lying face downwards on the low marginal wall of the central well, contemplatively spitting at his own reflection in the distant black depths of the water below; and he flitted away hurriedly at my footfall as though suddenly impelled to it by some harassing conscientious considerations, and slipped down a by-alley on bare feet, noiselessly, like the uneasy ghost of some guilty thing.

I wandered on aimlessly across the square, along the rude causeway, on towards the swamps. . . . Of a sudden a gaunt black hog uttered a startled grunt and cantered away amongst the gravestones. I had stumbled on to the precincts of the burial grounds.

The moon was showing stronger in the steely

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sky. The umber landscape was fading into lilac mysteries. The air was charged with the gray dust of evening. The earth reeked, ladening the hazy air with the sweet pungent scents of tropical blossoms. A mighty hush hung heavily over the world. On a tombstone, a hundred paces away, sat the bowed figure of a man, smoking pensively ; at his feet some lean black swine were grubbing with self-satisfied gruntings.

I stopped, loth to probe into the agony of a man in solitary communion with his own folly.

As I turned back I almost stumbled against a still figure that lolled shadow-like against the stem of a cocoanut-palm. The fireflies danced and flickered about her. She was bedizened in white with an English lady's discarded ball-dress which displayed abundantly the charms of her mahogany bust and arms. On her hands she wore long white gloves reaching to near the elbows. There was a scarlet flower in her black hair. But the dusk so enwrapped her that I was unable to see whether there sat exultation or pity on the brow of the dangerous widow Huckleback.

**IN THE HOUSE OF
THE SORCERER**



CHAPTER X

Wherein the Widow Tiffles becomes Possessed of a Devil

VAST soot-black night. North and south and east, to uttermost west, where the sun slept, engulfing black night encompassed all things and narrowed the wide boundaries of man's vision to the petty limits of a blind man's parish. The moon was blotted out, and all her gentle light gone from the earth, her pale lamp hidden behind a dark canopy of sullen cloud, the sombre drapery of which was drawn across the high hollow of the ill-lit heavens, massed and still, uncertain yet whither the winds would set them in motion, or here or there, or gently, or with sudden breath rudely fling them aside in tatters into the outer darkness, or sweep them away in mighty disorder over the edge of the world.

Nature was in a brooding mood, and her silence hung fearsomely over the mangrove-swamps like an unuttered threat.

The night was dark in the heavens above, but it lay blacker still in the dense thicket of the swamps, where under its dark cloak of green the

mangrove puts out crafty wooden fingers and steals the land stealthily foot by foot from the sea, gathering the sluggish sea-born river-mud about its roots and flinging it down thereat in suffocating silt to choke out the restless waters ; it lay pitchy black where the mangrove overgrows the low-lying land margent to the sea, reaching insolently up to the walls of the forts on the harbour's lip and creeping over the forgotten well-filled graveyards that lie thereby, once so trimly flourishing there, covering their neglect in a decent pall of sombre green, their thievish limbs showing the tender reverence to the dead that neglectful hands have ceased to show, and casting an annual tribute of buds and leaves upon the forgotten tombs ; it lay blackest of all where the mangrove, stretching landwards, joins the high jungle growth, the trees and dense undergrowth of which cast a mightier shade — the shadow of the bush, the bush that is forever encroaching in swift-growing tangle on the edge of the cultivated plains and clambering in strangling brigand-mood up the spurs of the foot-hills, held back only by the weaponed hand of man ; overwhelming his dwellings and the works of his craft — deserted barrack, forsaken factory, decayed manor-house — if man but relax his toil against it for a season.

Hard by the swamps, above one of the numer-

ous deserted ruins scattered here and there throughout the bush, and which to-day are fallen in, roofless and forgot, there was a dull glow of light from a fire that crackled within, and smoke and sparks in the smoke sprang upwards and dispersed with a hiss into the night air. The sleepy vultures, many-gathered on ruined wall and lofty tree near at hand, as though expectant of nature's sacrifice to Death, snorted and sneezed irritably as the smoke swept past them. The disturbed owls wheeled on silent pinions ghostlike over the roofless place, showing signs of disquietude, and blinking down at the fire-light in disgust; the goat-suckers, sweeping with hawk-like flight after the night insects, coughed as they winged through the ascending smoke; and the bats that had their habitation in the place fluttered about and twittered their discontent.

A woman crept out of the neighbouring bush, picked her way carefully amongst the lanterns that lay about the doorway; whispered something to the dim guardian negro that sat silent there; knocked four knocks upon the door, and, on its being opened to her, stepped in. As the door shut there was a strong gust of rum and the sour smell of negroes. The black fellow at the door shifted into more comfortable ease and yawned. The plaintive voice of a negress could be heard inside, raised in supplication :

“ Mamaloi — little queen mother ! make she’s body covered wid boils and sores by day ; make de black dog of de witches get into she’s throat and steal she’s breath and strangle she by night ; make all de evil come to Jezebel Huckleback ! ”

The voice ceased speaking, and there was a fluttering sound as of beating wings.

A long pause — sounds of people moving — and suddenly a drum began to beat to the wail of pipe, a deep voice roared out a barking snatch of song, a loud chorus followed with a crash, and there was a shuffle of dancing feet.

“ Aie — ahngo ! honk ! honk ! ”

The chorus burst from the throats of the negro women that stood in a circle round about the lighted place, and they beat their hands together, bowed themselves down, and stamped their bare feet ; drums boomed, pipe squealed, and the pulsing feet of a woman who danced in their midst shuffled upon the floor.

“ Aie — aie — ahngo ! honk ! honk ! ” crashed the chorus from the circle of women : and from the dim throng of negroes that stood behind them in the darkness it came again more hoarsely.

A fire of twigs crackled upon the ground, and the dense smoke rolled upwards to the night sky. Above the spluttering twigs the flames leaped,

flinging up handfuls of sparks into the ascending smoke.

As the circle of chanting black women, naked to the waist, bowed to the firelight and stamped their feet, the fire cast their shadows up the walls. Their skirts were fastened about their loins with scarlet cloths, and about their heads were bound blood-red checkered handkerchiefs that caused strange shapes to leap amongst the shadows on the walls ; and as they sang and swayed and clapped their hands and bowed themselves down and stamped their feet upon the ground, their shadows also rose and fell. And now and again dim figures that stood in the shadows behind them would pass a black bottle to the women in the circle, who would tilt it up to their lips, and, drinking from it, pass it back again.

“Aie — aie — ahngo ! honk ! honk !” cried the wailing voices of the women, as they threw up their chins, and the whole circle smote their hands together to the boom of the drums — then slowly bowed their heads, waving their arms downwards in obeisance. And “Aie — aie — ahngo ! honk ! honk !” crashed the chorus of the dim throng that stood beyond. As the women bowed themselves a negress raised her voice and cried a line of verse in quick recitative, and the circle of women stamped their feet rhythmically, slowly

raised their heads, threw up their chins, and burst out into chorus again :

“ Aie ! Aie ! ahngō ! honk ! honk ! ”

Again the women bowed whilst the singing woman sang her line; old African negresses whose withered breasts hung pendulous against their lean ribs, stout middle-aged black women with full breasts, Jamaican negro girls with budding breasts — all bowed themselves and sang and stamped their feet.

And all the while there danced in their midst the comely young negress ; she was almost naked, and she strutted with lithe swayings of the body and quaint movement of the hips, and slowly she shuffled her feet upon the floor to the throb of the drum, wail of the clarinet, cling of the triangle, and measure of the fierce singing ; and as she danced, the long strips of cloth that hung from her girdle before and behind chinked with little hawkbells.

At one side, within the circle of chanting women, a half-naked negro hunkered before a deep-sounding booming drum and with his hands beat upon it in slow throbbing accent, blinking the while at the fire before him ; at his left hand squatted another negro with shelving forehead and ape-like head, who held a smaller drum between his great feet and drummed rapidly and excitedly

upon it to the wild tune, and as he beat he stared out of the gloom with bloodshot eyes at the dancing woman's feet where she danced in front of him, and the perspiration trickled down his heavy jaws. On the other side of the player upon the large drum a dirty black fellow in rags sat on his heels, resting his elbows on his knees, and with distended wind-filled cheeks blew a weird monotonous wailing air upon a clarinet. Behind these stood a couple of negro girls — one beat a triangle, the other was she who, with head thrown back, to the rumble of drum and wail of pipe sang quickly in a high-pitched nasal cry the snatch of the plaintive chant — and when she uttered her hurried recitative, the chorus crashed out:

“Aie ! aie ! ahngo ! — honk ! honk !”

The drums boomed and throbbed, pipe squealed, and all the while the shuffling feet of the dancing woman pattered upon the ground where she danced before the seated figure at the end of the circle.

There, on a rude stone bench sat the ancient widow Tiffles, melting into the darkness behind her. She sat arrogantly, like one having authority. Her head was bound in a scarlet cloth, and the cloth was wet with the warm blood of a fresh-slain cockerel — the blood trickled down her withered chaps ; her sunken old eyes glittered in

their dark hollows, catching the flickering light from the wood fire. She stared before her, but her ken was far away in Africa. Thus she sat, munching her toothless gums, mouthing her vague imaginings; and now and again she gave a little yapping cry—then fell to mumbling her jaws again. The stone slab upon which she was seated was a tomb, filched from the graveyard by the old fort; and she sat upon it like an ancient goddess enthroned. She wore a dark robe, richly embroidered and bound about her middle with a scarlet scarf, and over the scarlet scarf was fastened a gorgeous belt. A black bottle stood at her side. Her bare feet were set upon a coarse wooden cage which rested on the floor in front of her, and inside and against the sides of the cage the coils of a sluggish black snake moved restlessly. Upon the ground at her feet lay the headless bodies of several white cockerels. One of the cockerels gave a last expiring flutter and stretched itself stiffly in death.

In the dark shadow behind the widow Tiffles, on a broad ledge of the old wall, a light burned before an idol. The blind little wooden image stood on his little bandy legs in an ungainly straddle and smiled, and the glow from the light at his feet lit his long blind face, smiling cynically there. He stood before a crude little print of the

Virgin Mary in a tawdry frame, and a little crucified sorrowing Christ rested against the wall. A bleached human skull gleamed white and grinned upon the ledge. The light showed red through a blood-filled glass vessel that lay at the feet of the idol.

The widow Tiffles took up the black bottle from beside her, drank from it, set it down again, and yapped like a dog — the drums boomed, and there was the thrash of dancing feet as the women burst into the chorus :

“ Aie ! aie ahngo ! — honk — honk ! ”

From the right hand and the left of the widow Tiffles swept the circle of women that bowed and stamped their feet. Within their circle four candles guttered upon the floor, and before each candle was a glass vessel filled with blood, and before each glass vessel the head of a white cockerel. At three of the corners, close up to the circle of the women, stood a young negress arrayed like the dancing woman, but wearing besides a cloth from loins to feet. In the fourth corner lay the discarded loin-cloth of the woman who danced. In the fifth place before the seated widow Tiffles, in front of the cage on which her feet were set, was no light, but an empty pair of old shoes ; and before the shoes a large black circle was drawn in charcoal upon the floor ; and it was within this

marked circle that the dancing woman danced. All the while her bare feet shuffled upon the floor where she jigged in the midst of the circle — she leaped and turned and strutted with slow swayings of her body and quaint movement of her hips, and leaped again — but always her feet moved to the rhythm of the music and the singing, and beat upon the floor to the throb of the deep drum. Her comely naked body swung lithely — the checkered cloth upon her head gleamed red in the firelight, and the long scarlet strips of cloth that hung from her girdle, before and behind, patterned all over with the little hawkbells, chink-chink-chinked as she danced. She stepped it wildly and ever more wildly ; and the faster she danced the louder shouted the chorus of women :

“ Aie — aie ahngo ! — honk ! honk ! ”

and beat their hands and bowed themselves down ; and the louder boomed the drums, more shrilly screamed the pipe, and sharper and more insistent came the shout of the chorus :

“ Aie — aie ahngo ! — honk ! honk ! ”

Faster and faster the dancing woman’s feet pattered and shuffled and stamped in wild frenzy ; then, of a sudden, she leaped into the air, spinning round with her arms held out — the swinging strips of cloth floated out — and as she lit upon her feet and stood to her full height she caught up the shout, and added with a hoarse cry :

“Aie ! Aie ! *Hoodoo ahngo !*”

And when she cried “hoodoo !” all the people raised themselves to their height, and the chorus crashed with a mad shout :

“Aie ! aie ! hoodoo ahngo ! — honk ! honk !”

And the drums roared.

The dancing woman skipped out of the marked ring and strutted slowly round the circle of women until she arrived at her set place, her hips moving and her feet beating slowly again to the throb of the drum.

Another woman let go the cloth from about her loins, flung it down, and was about to leap naked into the midst of the vacant black ring when the little old widow Tiffes was seen to arise suddenly from her seat — with a cry like the howl of a dog the old woman leaped into the circle — stamped an incongruous step or so in a vain effort to dance to the music — threw up her lean black arms — and fell upon the floor, foaming at the mouth.

There was a hissing cry for silence. The panting people stood still.

Out of the darkness beside the tomb a vile-looking old negro stepped into the dim light. His stealthy bare feet made no sound as he stepped in front of the tomb and faced the people. His stooping black body was naked except for a patched pair of trousers. A scarlet 'kerchief was tied

about his waist, and over it was a black leather belt, fastened by a brass buckle. His head was bound down to his eyes with a bright red cloth, and from under the cloth his villainous black face peered out like a great ape's. In his ears were large gold earrings that glittered in the light. His face was streaked with white paint, and streaks of white paint were on his bare black chest. He stood masterfully before the tomb, as a king might stand before his throne; and as he faced the people his great lips opened over the red gap of his mouth, showing a couple of snaggy pointed yellow teeth in the red gums. He it was that had made the hissing sound, signing to make silence.

The drums and the wild air stopped; the singing ceased with it — the panting people were still,

The old sorcerer's bloodshot eyes looked evilly over the circle of silent women, then glanced calmly down at the old woman where she lay struggling in a fit upon the floor at his feet. He licked his lips and spoke, picking his words and phrases with the pretty precision of a man who speaks in an acquired tongue:

“ De spirit of Obi has passed out of its dwelling-place in de body of de snake and entered into dis woman.”

As he spoke, a voice in the room repeated his words in a strange tongue.

The people all fell upon their knees and prostrated themselves, placing their foreheads to the ground and smiting their palms upon the earth.

The old sorcerer stepped forward, and lifting the fallen woman in his arms he dragged her to the tomb and laid her upon it. When he had placed her upon a stone slab he put his hand upon her eyes and she lay thereafter perfectly still. He passed his hand swiftly over the altar light that burned before the idol — it hissed and spluttered, and a blue flame leaped up and lit the cynical face of the blind idol — and they saw that the idol smiled.

The old sorcerer turned about and faced the prostrate people with a dignity that sat strangely upon so vilely filthy a rogue ; his heavy lips moved ; and what he spake came to the ears of the people thus :

“Obi is great. The Spirit of Evil is mightier than the spirit of good — mightier and more eternal. All else perishes and passes into dust — hearsay — a dream — and is not. But evil is without end — evil endureth for ever. That which is good can do us no hurt. Therefore the Controller of evil is more fearful than the Maker of good. The noblest repute is besmattered ; the white man’s Christ the preacher shamefully useth, so that the Christ doth not know their Christ and

departeth from His altars. But the only mitigation of evil is the false witness that it is good; and the mitigation but increaseth the evil. God can do no evil, therefore have ye no fear, for in taking vengeance God putteth Himself lower than the beasts. The white people cannot prove their God but by faith; so say they, if ye have faith and will it, then He answereth: yet they sneer at *your* faith because you cannot prove it; but I ask you, shall the sneer of the white man, who foundeth but on faith his hope of *life eternal*, put out *your* faith? Hath *bis* faith destroyed evil? The white man believeth there is a God, not because he can prove it, but because he cannot. But evil requireth no proof. This is the longest remembered story of the ages, that the first man and the first woman and their firstborn did evil; in the white man's book of life it is so written, that the first man and the first woman did evil, and their firstborn slew his brother: for these things are they chiefly remembered, but the good that they did is forgotten. For the spirit of evil is mightier than the will of God; Obi in his habitation in the snake destroyed the design and the handiwork of God and sullied Paradise. Hath the white man put down the lust and greed amongst his own, that he findeth evil only amongst us? He cometh amongst us and ordereth that our women shall

live in chastity — live only with one man ; but I tell you that the law of the white man alloweth the white man to live unchaste. In the making of laws is much confusion ; they that write upon paper have not of necessity wisdom. I say unto you, let the white man mend his own ways before he mends ours. They make one law for the man and another for the woman, for the man standeth in the pulpit. The fools ! for how shall the woman avoid adultery if the man live adulterous ? The white preacher ordereth that we overthrow our gods ; yet he raiseth mighty temples to his own God, with praise and music and singing he raiseth up altars to his God, but he maketh the law of life to his own desires, and in his own house he forgetteth charity and even pulleth down his neighbour's Christ. For evil overcometh good. The white man preacheth the Son of God but feareth to follow the laws of the Son of God. For evil is stronger than good. Take no heed to the tattling of fools, but remember that you have your passions and your desires given to you that you may use them. Evil endureth for ever. You have called to Obi for a sign, and he hath given it. We have called to the devil of hate that hath his dwelling-place in the body of the snake, and it has passed into this woman where she lieth upon the house of the

dead. Her soul is become the soul of Hate — her breath the breath of Hate. The body of the woman sleepeth, and the spirit of Hate hath wholly taken possession of it. Obi hath answered your prayers, and his presence, made manifest in this woman's body, shall, if you have perfect faith, make your will of Hate manifest in act, and shall accomplish it."

Suddenly a cock crowed shrilly in the distance. The old obeah-man ceased speaking. A heavy silence fell upon the place. Another cock crowed, and another, and a fourth. The hideous ruffian stood, his head raised, listening, and his throat worked like a lizard's. An answering cock crowed far away — and another nearer — and another hard by — then, suddenly, as if about and beside them all, coming from near the smiling idol, a bass-throated cock crowed loud and clear, and its crowing filled the place. The sound swelled, hung in the air for a space, and slowly passed away. The prostrate people were shaking with suppressed excitement.

The old African spake again: and it came to their understanding thus;

"The cock hath crowed cheerily — danger is at hand. Obi will have no further prayers to-night. Obi loveth the darkness; but the cockerel loveth the light. The cock putteth his feet upon the

dunghill and greeteth the light — and the coming of day giveth him cheerful speech. But the birds of the air die and fester and rot — evil is eternal. What things you have seen you have seen. That which is appointed shall happen. The passions of man shall scar the face of the earth — and hate not the least of these. The secret things that your eyes have seen, ponder ye silently in your hearts. For that which is spoken is spoken, and may not be gathered again into the mystery of silence. That which is once spoken has lost its mystery, and the secret strength of evil that was in the unspoken thing hath utterly gone out of it. That which is known killeth mystery — but we are born in mystery and die in mystery, and mystery keepeth us for her own. Obi acts through mystery alone ; he punisheth always the breach of his ritual — and hath no mercy.”

When he had spoken, he turned, and stooping into the darkness at the side of the tomb he gripped hold of a struggling bird. When he faced the kneeling people again, he held up in his hand by the wings a white cockerel, and whipping a long blade from the tomb behind his back, he struck the head off the cockerel. A woman ran forward and caught the gush of the spurting blood in a glass vessel — then laid the vessel on the tombstone. The sorcerer flung the headless white

body on the ground amongst the others that already lay there, where it fluttered and slowly trembled to quietude.

He stepped behind the tomb again, brought out a bottle of rum, and filled up the glass vessel, mixing the spirit with the red blood that was already in it; and, standing at the foot of the tomb whereon lay the still figure of the woman, and gripping in his right hand the gleaming knife, its blade dripping blood, his wicked little eyes glittering under the black projecting brows, he lifted the glass vessel and drank a mouthful of the blood and spirit; placing the vessel back on the tomb again, he called to Obi, crying out that leprosy, and foul disease, and madness and a sickening death should fall upon whomsoever broke the oath of secrecy; then ordering the people each to swear the oath, he cried "Go!"

They all rose; and as they passed, each of them dipping their fingers in the vessel and smearing the blood and spirit upon their lips and foreheads and breasts, they made oath, filed slowly out of the doorway, and, taking their lanterns, crept noiselessly away into the night.

The sorcerer, standing rigidly still, watched them go.

As the last of them passed out, the old ruffian flung the knife amongst the dark shadows behind

the tomb, and moved swiftly over to where the snake lay in the cage. He bent down, pulled up a stone slab, and dropped the cage into a hole below, and the hawkbells upon the cage chinked and jingled as it fell. He replaced the stone, stepped over to the prostrate old widow Tiffles, and, stooping over her, made passes with his hands across her eyes, gazing keenly at her the while, and mumbling to her in some strange jargon.

The widow Tiffles sighed heavily, opened her eyes, and arose stiffly from where she lay, sitting up gaunt and dazed on the side of her uncanny resting-place. A chill shiver shook her body. Picking up a black cloth that lay beside her, she put it about her shoulders, blinking her eyes and mumbling; and as she sat blinking there, the little wizened old face looked like the face of a sick vulture.

The sorcerer spoke to her:

“ De night-wind’s risin’, and de water’s bound to be gettin’ restless mighty soon, sister.”

The old woman nodded her head absently.

He touched her arm:

“ De time is passin’ sister — yo’ has only got till de break-o’-day.”

The widow Tiffles sighed, stood up with difficulty, and gazed at the sorcerer dazedly, the weary old fingers of one lean black hand picking at the

black knuckles of the other. Then she said in a vague sing-song, as a child repeats a message on being sent upon an errand :

“ De liver of a pussun four days buried, and de little finger of a little child dead in the borning.”

The old man nodded. “ Dat so,” said he ; and added in a tone of authority :

“ Git along quick to de rocks — and when yo’ come whar de sea begins to sound, mew like yo’ was a tom-cat. De fisherman he’s waitin’ dar, lyin’ down and hidin’ heself behind de rock-stones, and when he done hear de mewin’ he’s goin’ to stand up on de rocks. Den yo’ is got to walk up to he, and yo’ is got to tell he — *King Ardash he says : take me across de water and land me at de buryin’ jetty at Gallows Point* ; an’ de fisherman he’s goin’ to say nothin’ exceppin’ walk to de boat. When yo’ git dar — dar are a shovel under de bush alongside o’ de fourth cocoanut-tree on de left-hand side of de gate o’ de buryin’-ground. Sister — de night is short and waits for no man — not even for Obi — even de Spirit of Evil he’s got to take he’s rest sometimes and he loses he’s strength in de light of day. In one hour de sentries dey will be callin’ ‘ Twelve o’clock and all’s well ! ’ And den half de night done finished.”

The widow Tiffles nodded absently ; and with her eyes fixed on vacancy, she passed out of the

doorway, and stepped towards the bush. The sorcerer could hear her slow carpet-slipped feet, shuffling along the broken ground until the sound mingled into the other sibilant sounds of the night — the bush seemed alive with restless stealthy movement and strange whisperings.

The old man stood for a long while. Through the open door he could hear the rustle of the people clothing themselves in their hiding-places in the bush ; he heard the distant farewells as they parted ; heard them brushing through the narrow bush-paths. At last the sounds of their departing wholly died out into the night, and they were gone beyond his hearing.

The old African's mouth spread in an evil grin : “ Twelve o'clock,” he chuckled, and added, mimicking the sentries, “ and all's well. Huh ! — and all's well ! Dat mighty funny — ho ! ho ! ”

He turned into the room, his eyes bent upon the ground where the dead bodies of the headless white cockerels lay upon the floor, and he stood listening so for a long while.

Then he chuckled again :

“ Holy gracious ! — and all's well ! ”

He walked behind the stone seat, and from amidst the strange jumble of odds and ends, bleached skulls of cats and parrots, polished human finger-bones, and other piled-up rubbish

and foul-smelling charms and spells, he took a black bottle of rum, uncorked it, and putting it to his mouth, tilted it up and took a long pull at it. It was fiery strong, so that he coughed when he had done, and wiped his hand across his lips.

He stood, the bottle in his hand, and gazed with a rapt look at the flickering light of the fire, an ear cocked in a keen listening attitude.

Again his great lips spread in a mirthless grin over the snaggy teeth and foul red gums :

“ Dat so,” said he with husky chuckle. “ Dat so. He-hee ! Britannia rules de waves — and — all’s well. Hee-hee ! and all’s well ! Nevertheless I wonder what for dat fisherman feller give’d de alarm of cockcrow ! ” . . .

“ King Ardah, I has come ! ”

The old sorcerer’s heart stopped — then leaped against his ribs — and a chill sweat came out upon him. He raised his bloodshot eyes : the figure as of a woman risen from the dead stood before him. Her face was bound in swathings of white cloth, except for her eyes ; and she was clothed wholly in white that clung damply to her as though she were enwrapped in cerements. A sickening dread benumbed the old ruffian, so that the bottle almost dropped out of his nerveless fingers. The room spun round him ; the floor lurched up at him and

fell away again ; there was a hissing in his ears. He would have cried out, but his dry tongue moved noiselessly in his mouth, and his parched throat swallowed the whisper of his intention. With a mighty effort of will he kept his feet. His hoarse voice was ghostly hollow when at last he found speech.

“ Gahd ! ” said he.

“ No. Deborah Bryan,” said she.

The old sorcerer recovered himself. The chill sweat turned warm upon him.

“ What for yo’ has come here, woman ? ” he said roughly.

“ What for not ? ” answered she. “ I reckon yo’ has been havin’ dis here foreign Hayti trash kickin’ around and yellin’ here dis evenin’ Huh ! I is not de one to complain, but, if yo’ is goin’ to git mixed up wid dat Hayti trash, yo’ is bound to get into plenty trouble, king.”

The old sorcerer scowled. He repeated angrily : “ I ax you what for you has come here, Deborah Bryan ? ”

“ I want to kill a woman,” answered she with deliberate distinctness.

“ Dat all ? ” he asked sarcastically, and he laughed. “ Ho-ho ! dat all, Deborah Bryan ? ”

“ Dat’s all,” she answered calmly.

“ Huh-huh ! yo’s jest goin’ to kill a woman ! He-hee ! ” said he.

"No. *Yo'* has got to do de killin'—*yo'* has got to bring de pains o' death to dis woman," she answered steadily. "She's got to die."

"Huh-huh! And who's de woman?" he asked.
"Jezebel Huckleback."

The old man nodded his head.

"De whole o' de ladies in dis island seems like dey done got deir feelin's riz agin dis here Jezebel Huckleback," said he drily.

Deborah Bryan stamped her foot.

"I has come'd across de water in a blasted leakin' dug-out by meself—I has come through de duppies and de stingin'-flies o' dis blamed bush to de obeah-man to settle dis thing."

"Yo' has done well," said he.

"And I is goin' to stay right down here till yo' gives me de obeah-poison dat is goin' to poison Jezebel Huckleback." A dreamy look came into her eyes. "De mosquites and de stingin'-flies and de sandflies, dat lives around in dis here bush alongside o' de saltponds, has nearly busted de patience and sting'd the swearin' vocabulary out o' Deborah Bryan dis bresséd evening; but I reckon deir stingin' is like eatin' watermelons up again de stomach-ache I is goin' to fix up inside de corsets o' dis female Jezebel Huckleback."

Her little eyes glittered cruelly.

The old sorcerer coughed:

"Neverdeless it appears to me, Deborah Bryan, dis here is most onchristian feelin's to be buzzin' around inside de constitution of a married female," said he. "How come dat so?"

"How come dat so?" she snorted. "Huh! I tell yo'. My man Boaz Bryan he's been arter dis trash Jezebel Huckleback again—he's just sotpled down to carryin' on promiscuous wid dat female. De time was when he don't content wid worshippin' she heself, but he was allers holdin' she up to me, he's lawful wife—it was allers 'Jezebel dis' and 'Jezebel dat' from break-o'-day till lamplight. I reckon it are bad enough worryin' around and makin' a show of worshippin' yo'r lawful married husband widout sotlin' down to worshippin' all de females dat takes he's fancy. I reckon I knock'd de stuffin' out o' dat foolishness. And now he's taked to talkin' about de female in he's sleep. I tell yo' I is goin' to stop dis foolin'. I is jest goin' to tear de entrails out o' de situation—and sottle it."

"Huh-huh?" grunted the old man grimly.

"Huh-huh! Dat so—and a heap mo' dan huh-huh. I see'd me mother about it more dan a month ago, and I tell'd her about dis here Jezebel circumstance. It take'd a consider'ble time to git de idea through the ole creature's wool; den when she done got a grip on to de idea it take'd her a

consider'ble time more to ponder around it. Den she laid a heap o' wangas and tricks agin Jezebel. No good. And she make'd a heap o' charms to keep de strength o' me love over Boaz Bryan. No good. . . . I done notice, de last two or three new moons, dat me mother she's been mighty on-sartin' in she's temperaments — she done been losin' she's strength — she's mighty sleepy in de daytime, like she done been settin' up carryin' on in de nights — and de mumblin's is growin' on she — and she appears like she was more full of gin-iral foolishness, and cantank'rous cussedness, and obstinaciousness. It takes a heap o' talkin' to git things into she's wool. Neverdeless de day befo' yesterday I done send word to she dat she's charms and tricks and spells and mumblin's don't amount to no good at all; wid dat she done send back word she war comin' along to give she's opinion. She come'd round yesterday arternoon, and I tell'd her a heap o' circumstances concernin' Boaz Bryan — and I reckon de widow Tiffles she tell'd me a heap more I don't hear'd about. She tell'd me she done sot up wid sheself de whole o' de blessed night afore, thinkin' around de business, and she allowed de circumstances done got beyond she's reckonin', though she done got a heap of expe'iaunce wid married men in she's time. She calculated to reckon de best thing I has got to do

is to git along and see de obeah-man dey calls King Ardah, across de harbour. And I has come."

The old sorcerer stood grimly there, the black rum-bottle in his fist, and smiled. He licked his thick lips and fixed his eyes keenly and intensely upon the eyes of the woman before him; and there was a long silence between them. Neither stirred.

At last he said calmly:

"De widow Tiffles she are a mighty strong sorcerer sheself, de most vig'rous sorcerer in dis island—exceppin' only meself. She's been tryin' and tryin'—but she don't able to raise de devil of Hate. She's magic it don't got de strength to call up de spirits out of Africa. She was bound to come to de ole obeah-man"—he drew himself up proudly—"and she come'd." He strode over to the tomb and placed the bottle upon the stone slab with a clink. Then he turned; and standing there, with the dignity which had sat so strangely upon him before the people, his hoarse voice broke out in the chanting speech, that was wholly devoid of negro inflection and slurred sounds to the woman's ears:

"We have met together and made sacrifice to the four corners of the earth—to the rising of the sun, where the night dies amongst the mists; to

the setting of the same, where the night is born out of the darkness ; to the south where the four stars sink amidst the waste of waters ; to the north where barren places are—and we called to the places under the earth, in the fifth place where the dead sleep—and we made sacrifice, slaying white cockerels, which are of the enemies of Obi.” He swept his hand towards where the four candles guttered upon the ground. “And they that had the desire of Hate in their hearts bowed themselves down to Obi in his habitation in the body of the snake, and prostrated themselves in the dust, and called aloud to Obi to send the devil of Hate into the body of the woman that sat in the fifth place, that it might manifest itself and accomplish their desire. And the four women that stood in the places towards the four corners of the earth bit each the arm of the other, and sucked the blood the one of the other, and cried out to Obi with lips of blood, and danced before the fifth place. And with music and dancing the frenzy of the strong willing of evil came upon us, and we called with the might of our desire upon Obi, with the blood of cockerels upon our lips. And of a sudden the devil of Hate that was in the snake came out of it and entered into the woman where she sat in the fifth place upon the house of the dead, and she leaped up and fell upon the

ground — and the devil of Hate rent her body so that she foamed at the mouth."

He paused awhile. The woman stood silent, breathing hard. The foul old man strode over to her and stared her in the face.

"De widow Tiffles," he went on, "*she* was in de fifth place — and she riz up, and she are gone straightaway to de buryin'-grounds to git de evil spell to put it upon *she's* enemy. She are bound to lay it upon *she's* enemy before de break-o'-day. And on whomsoever she lay dat spell, evil and madness, and after de madness sores and agony and a dreadful death, shall come — unless, when she has de spell in *she's* hand, she are smitten *she-self* upon de back by de hand of de friend of *she's* enemy befo' *she* lays de spell; and if *she* are smitten so upon de back, woe be to *she*! for that which *she* done desired to *she's* enemy shall fall upon *she*self."

As the gaze of the snake-like eyes pierced into hers, Deborah Bryan felt the grip of the excitement of this venomous ruffian fasten upon her. Her senses thrilled unwilling to the words he spoke, and she now of a sudden knew with speechless certainty the force of his unspoken desires. Her senses swooned into darkness — lost knowledge — came back again with a lurch; but she saw the evil rogue more dimly now through her numb

vision. The snake-like play of his tongue between the raw-red gums, as he darted it between the yellow fangs of his eye-teeth and licked his great lips, usurped her imagination and fascinated her with terror. Again her brain whizzed. She heard him forming his base desires though he spoke no word; and she gave way to the fear of him. Again there was a singing in her ears; again her brain swooned — and she stepped into the kingdom of the blind. She felt a great comforting urging to sleep come upon her. Her knees gave way for an instant —

But she was the daughter of the widow Tiffles; and she knew this fellow had some fear of her. With her whole strength she gripped her reason, and fought with her might against the desire to sleep. And as she exerted her powerful will with dogged obstinate courage, she felt the curious soothing sleepy sensation pass away; the sickening swoonings of her brain became less forceful and then wholly ceased. The keen jewel-like snaky light went out from the glittering little evil eyes under the great projecting black brows of the hideous old man in front of her; the fierce thrusts of his stabbing gaze weakened; his glance fell, ran down her figure, and stayed at her feet.

Neither spoke. The woman was panting — like one who in broad daylight suddenly escapes a

sudden and terrible death and finds the birds singing and the sun shining. Her hands moved—her self-control had returned.

She laughed shrilly with strident nervousness; turning on her heels she walked over to the stone seat, and facing about towards the old sorcerer she sat down upon the tomb. Her hands were shaking. She hid them in her skirts.

The old ruffian scowled; striding up to her, he stood before her and said, with hoarse anger:

“I has a mind to put de curse of Obi upon yo’, Deborah Bryan !”

“Your curses done bring’d no harm to me enemies — how is dey goin’ to bring de bad luck to me? I ax yo’ dat !” said she fearlessly. “I don’t wantin’ no cussin’. I want dis Jezebel woman killed—I want she killed—I want she killed!” she chanted huskily; and she slapped her hands on the stone seat. “Obeah-man! I want she killed—dead. I want she buried—dat I kin take up she’s body and tear out she’s entrails and fling ’em to de buzzards. Only de obeah-man done able to bring de black death to dis female—and I want she dead.”

The old ruffian’s pride was soothed.

“Dat all ?” he asked.

“I want she killed—killed!” repeated the woman.

"Yo' has come to de right place," he said.

She nodded her head. "Yestidday I wanted she's body covered wid boils," she crooned, "and full of sickness; and she's head full o' madness; and strangling death not too quick. But I has lost me patience — I want she killed!"

The obeah-man showed his snaggy yellow teeth in a smile.

"You has come in de ripe time," he answered ; "dis night de spirit of Obi done manifest itself — de sign done been given. Come here at de next moon and we'll make sacrifice and — "

The woman stamped her foot upon the ground. She leaped up from the tomb and laughed bitterly. The old sorcerer stepped back a pace, embarrassed. She put her hand into the bosom of her bodice, and bringing out a hand-full of some charms and spells therefrom, she flung them down upon the floor. Her eyes blazed, malignant red with passion, and she shrieked hoarsely in her fury :

"Curse yo'r tricks and conjurin's and spells and charms and all dese here wangas and child-toys — curse 'em all!" She glared savagely at the scowling old man, as he stood silent there in the gloom. "I is tired o' dese manifestin's and signs and foolin's and trash. Tired — tired — tired!" Her arms dropped wearily by her sides — the old sorcerer standing sullenly in the dark-

ness kept watchful eyes upon her; but he uttered no word. She pointed at the things she had flung from her, where they lay scattered about the ground. "What done dese here wangas done for me? Dat trick yo' give'd me—it was goin' to spoil de life o' dis here Jezebel woman. Dese here dry lizards, and forty-legs, and hopper-grasses, and cockroaches, and locusts, and fireflies, and scorpions, and frogs, and bedbugs, and a piece o' de skin offen of one o' dem stingin'-snakes from St. Lucia, and a piece o' de lungs of a jackass, and a hair out o' de head o' dis Jezebel female—dey was all dried up, and I see you beat 'em fine into a powder before me two eyes—wid dat I see'd yo' mix four pinches o' de grave-drift from offen of de grave o' dat mulatter fellow dat suicided heself—de fellow dat hanged heself and was buried widout a funeril—‘*Put dat in de person's head,*’ says yo', and yo' spitted four times into de midst o' de powder, ‘*put a four pinches o' dat dust on to de person's head,*’ says yo', ‘*and all dese things I teel yo' is bound to come to pass,*’ says yo'. ‘*She's flesh is bound to dry up and lose its plumpness and freshness,*’ says yo', ‘*and she's hair it's goin' to drop off,*’ says yo'; ‘*she's goin' to become mighty cantankerous and fretty in she's temperaments, and she's goin' to git no contentment out o' she' vittles—she's goin' to dream awful bad dreams—she's goin' to*

sleep mighty restless and git no strength out o' she's sleep — and she's goin' to lose de use of she's two legs — and she's goin' to get she's skin spotted like she was a snake — and she's goin' to hear de rustlin' sounds in she's ears, and she's goin' to see sparks befo' she's eyes, and she's bones is goin' to dry up, and she's goin' to git de evil taste in she's mouth, and she's voice goin' to git powerful husky, and she's goin' to think foolishness, and worry she's neighbours wid listenin' to it,' says yo'. Huh! dat all mighty stoopenjous. And dis ole fool Deborah Bryan she believe'd dese things — all de time."

She struck her chest with her clenched fist and laughed bitterly :

"Dat's de partic'lar kind o' promiscuous ijjiot yo' is, Deborah Bryan!" she cried, and again she laughed bitterly. . . . "I gits hangin' around dis here Jezebel female, carryin' on like I never loved any gal de way I love she—puttin' me arms round she, and lettin' on I is mighty fond o' she; and wid dat I put a four pinches o' dat powder on to dat nigger trash's hair. Huh!" She looked at the scowling old ruffian before her with undisguised contempt. "I ax yo', done dat female get de mange in she's hair? done she's hair fallen off? — Huh! it appears to me she's hair it done grow'd straighter and longer and stronger and shinier ever since dat time. I ax yo' done she lose de use of

she's legs? — huh! she never walk'd more spry
and more sassier dan I see she walking wid my
Boaz dis bresséd day. I ax yo', done she's skin
git spotty like de snake's? done she's voice git
hoarse like de jackass? done she's flesh fall in,
and she's skin wither and wrinkle? done she git
squeaky and stiff in de joints? done she's breasts
git lean? done she git de misery in she's head?
— huh! all a passel ob outrajious lies. Huh!
she's hair don't even turn to wool. Sho! de female
she's all de *better* for dat powder — de gal done
git finer and spryer and sassier and prettier and
mo' vig'rous every day since I putted dat blasted
powder on to she's head. She are runnin' about
Port Royal dis day wid all de black trash in de
town foolin' around arter she, and she done take'd
away all de black ijiots from deir lawful married
wives, and she done take'd away me own man,
Boaz Bryan. Sho!" she snorted, "a heap of
evil dis here obeah-powder bring'd to Jezebel
Huckleback."

The old man waited cunningly until she had
exhausted her spleen; he uttered never a word,
but stood there mysteriously mute. After a long
silence, whilst her panting breath came easier and
the heaving of her chest less frequent as her fury
cooled, evading her torrent of questions, he spoke
sullenly:

"Deborah Bryan, yo' has sullied de name of Obi dis night in de house of Obi—yo' has questioned de might of Obi—and Obi being questioned does not forgive, his light is dull upon he's altars, and to yo' he gives no sign—will never again give a sign. Yo' shall lose all yo' possess dis night. Madness shall fall upon de last house you done left after de sun set dis night; and Death shall enter into de first house you shall step into after midnight to-night. Evil and disaster shall follow yo'r footsteps until de sun rises in de heavens and de white cock crows. And whatsoever evil befalls you, it cannot be undone."

He ceased speaking, and spat upon her skirts. She felt a chill creep over her flesh—the thrashing sound was in her ears again, and there came a swooning. She roused herself, glowering at the old sorcerer sullenly; and she saw that he too shivered where he stood. Her anger got the better of her religious dread.

She laughed insolently.

"I has hear'd all dis befo'," she cried, stamping her foot. "I tell yo' obeah bring'd no harm to dis Jezebel—how it goin' to bring de bad luck to me? De whole town seems like it done gone stampin' foolish after dis Jezebel woman—and de whole o' de town dat's not runnin' arter she, dey is layin' obeah agin she. If de curse of Obi

done goin' to bring dat kind o' bad luck" — she bared her breasts and raised her arms to the night — " den Obi curse me!"

She sat down on the tomb, and scowled at him from under her brows.

Suddenly she leaped up again.

" Yo' is losin' yo'r credit, king! yo' is losin' yo' credit. Yo'r charms has lost deir strength. De whole town dey's talkin' about it."

He flinched; and she saw that he flinched. She laughed shrilly:

" Poison's better dan all dis blasted mange in de head and humbuggin' foolishness. Yo' is jest wastin' yo'r miracles, king. A little poison, King Ardash — jest a little poison — a — little — poison," she urged coaxingly; then added with a sneer: " but de British Gob'ment it done grown stronger dan Obi."

She drew herself up before him, and the sneer went from her lips through her whole body — went from her body and burnt into his deepest conceit. And she saw it.

She sat down and beat her palms upon the stone seat.

The old sorcerer glanced at her keenly. He knew this woman practised the black magic herself at second-hand — he knew she had a wide reputation amongst the women — he knew she

had the power more than any gossip in the island to mar his reputation. And he considered the risks.

The mosquitoes pinged in the dark. The rising night-wind, on its way to the sea, rustled amongst the trees outside.

At last he spoke :

“ What was de signs — from de time yo’ done left on dis journey to Obi across de water ? ” he asked.

“ I was dat hustled for time I don’t notice’d anything too curious,” she said dreamily, searching her memory with eager earnestness, “ exceppin’,” she added after a pause, “ exceppin’ a black dog was yowlin’ on de jetty.”

“ Black dog yowlin’ at beginnin’ of yo’ journey shows dar is bound to be a death before de end — so dar’s bound to be a death anyway,” he said in low excuse to himself. He gazed at her under intent brows. “ Dat was all de curious things you done notice’d ? ” he asked. “ Yo’ don’t notice’d nothin’ in de water ? ”

“ Nothin’,” said she.

“ Nothin’ ? ” he queried anxiously.

“ Nothin’,” she answered — “ exceppin’ some-thin’ leaped in de water and a ring of white light come’d on de black water, and ran away out large and den busted up.”

"Hum — h'm ! Dat show dat de circle o' life are finished for some person dis night," said he.

"Huh-huh !" She nodded. She wanted the poison.

"When yo' come'd 'long here in de bush, yo' don't notice'd no sound ?" he asked.

"I hear'd an owl in de dark call hoo-hoo ! — no other sound."

"No other sound ?" he asked.

"No other sound," she answered.

"Dat a good prognostications," said the old man. "Dat show de death is appointed. It's not de act of man's hand — it are appointed. Yo' kin have de poison."

Her face flushed hot in the darkness, but she sat perfectly still. Her lips parted. It was the only sign she gave that her heart leaped.

He walked round behind the tomb, mumbling and bending the knee as he moved ; took up an empty black rum-bottle ; put something into it with great care, crooning a strange incantation the while, and bowing, and bending the knee. He brought the bottle round to where the woman sat upon the tomb, and taking up the black bottle of rum which stood beside her he divided the small remaining liquor about equally between the two bottles. He put back the rum-bottle upon the tomb, and carefully shaking up the poisoned drink, he set that down also on the stone seat.

The sorcerer turned to her :

“ Dis here are a mighty powerful poison, Deborah Bryan — de gall of de alligator is full of hate for man — yo’ is got to remember yo’ can give too much poison for killin’, and yo’ can give too little poison for killin’. Too much poison makes folks sick, and dey casts up de pains of death. Too much evil allers makes de stomick hanker arter good. Therefore I has been careful I don’t give’d yo’ too much. . . . Mix dis wid de lady’s drink. . . . I tell yo’ de pusson dat drinks dis poison done bound to die a drefful death.”

“ Dat all right,” said Deborah Bryan, trembling with excitement — a red light was in her eyes. She put out her hand towards the bottle — he stopped her.

“ Mind yo’, sister,” said he, “ yo’ has got to be keerful. When de woman has drinked off de poison yo’ is still got to remember Obi are mystery — de poison don’t goin’ to begin to act till yo’ done fill’d de empty bottle wid water four times and emptied de bottle on to de thirsty sand four times, and den yo’s got to break de bottle and throw de pieces into de sea. . . . Obi gives signs and strikes, but Obi is never seen.”

The woman sat and watched him intently out of her shrewd eyes, and nodded to all his commands. She was burning to have the bottle in her eager fingers ; but she noted every instruction.

"I is goin'," she said at last, half-rising.

The old man pushed away the bottle from her hastily, so that it clinked against the other. "Obi want four times four times four pieces of silver," said he.

Deborah Bryan sighed heavily, fumbled about in the bosom of her cotton dress — sighed again — brought out a little dirty bag — and, untying the confining strings, poured out a little heap of shillings on to the stone slab. They clinked as they fell. She set out these, her hard-earned savings, gathered together with long labour and pinching care, placing them in fours upon the slab. When she had reached the end of her counting there were three over. She put them back into the bag, tied it up carefully, and replaced it in her bodice. "De gatherin' o' dat dar money done take me all de time since I been married wid Boaz Bryan," she said with a sigh.

The old sorcerer coughed.

Deborah Bryan arose, took the bottle, and, without another word, turned on her heel and walked grimly out of the door.

The sorcerer followed her to the threshold.

As she stepped out into the night a distant clock began striking the hour of midnight. The last stroke of the hour passed on the wind. Deborah Bryan suddenly stopped, wheeled about, and

came hurriedly back. She entered the place, and, walking over to the tomb, stooped down, picked up her carpet slippers which she had kicked off and forgotten, and put them on her feet. She turned again, and without further word or salutation brushed past the old man and stepped out into a passing flood of moonlight.

“Good-night, sistah!” said the old sorcerer. “I reckon dar is goin’ to be a consider’ble heap more wind before dey is less.”

But her eyes were fixed upon her purpose, and her ears were deaf to the intentions of nature.

The old ruffian stood and watched her go. Through a silvery rent in the heavy clouds that slowly drifted across the heavens a pale flood of cold moonlight passed across the open space before the door, swept over the world, lit the figure of the hurrying woman, and was swallowed into the blackness; another lagging flash of moonlight came and went — Deborah Bryan was gone. He listened to her step until her light footfall ceased to whisper any echo in his careful ears. He strained his hearing; but the risen wind creaked the trees and rustled the leaves and tiresomely denied him.

He stood silent and absently pensive for some time after she had gone.

At last the old man chuckled.

"Huh-huh! De ole story—Always de same
—Anudder woman!—Always dat."

He listened again. His evil eyes held a frown. "If she done use de poison, dat's *she's* business," he muttered. "I don't got nothin' agin Jezebel Huckleback. I only *sell* it to de gal—I only sell dat poison for rats—dey is a heap o' rats in Port Royal—and rats and poison dey seems like dey was made for one another—ho-ho! dat so. Nevertheless de pusson dat takes dat poison, instead of de rats, is goin' to die a drefful death. It done make me almost tremmle to think o' de pains o' death dat dar pusson is goin' to suffer. . . . And it are a mighty pity likerwise—it appears like dis here Jezebel are a spry female. . . ." He shook his head, standing there awhile in thoughtful mood. "Deborah Bryan she are as secret and as safe as a collectin'-bag in church. She's got de craft and subtlety of de ole devil heself. Huh! dat female she knows de meaning o' things, I tell yo'—she not goin' to put de rope round she's own neck."

The gusts of the night-wind swished amongst the leaves, swaying the silhouetted outlines of the sleeping vultures and swinging them to their sighing lullaby. The place seemed haunted with buzzards this night—they snored on tree and ruined wall, and slept almost within reach of the hand.

In a lull of the breeze the distant bay of a dog
came faintly borne between gust and gust.

"Huh-huh!" muttered the old man—"a dog
callin'—dey is some person not goin' to see de
light o' day agin, dat sartin' sure."

He fumbled in a pocket of his patchy breeches,
drew out a piece of chalk, and scored a white
cross on the door-post.

"Dat keep de evil enterin' from without till de
cock crow," said he, and shuffled indoors. "Huh-
huh!" he muttered, "dere is a heap o' prognosti-
cations buzzin' around dis evenin'—I don't liked
dat black dog yellin' on de jetty in de direction o'
Deborah's journey. Dar is bound to be a heap
o' happenin's."

He moved towards the neglected bottle on the
tombstone, but halted on the way.

His glance had fallen upon the pieces of silver
money that gleamed on the stone slab.

The old man chukled softly.

"Ho-ho! he-he-hee! Anudder woman! — al-
ways dat. He-hee!"

He shuffled over to the tombstone, stretched
out his arm, and took up the black bottle.

"Nevertheless," said he, sitting down amongst
the silver pieces, "it is written in de white folk's
book of life: *de seed of de woman shall bruise de ser-
pent's head.*" He nodded his dusty poll; and then
he laughed low.

"Ho-ho-ho!" he chuckled, "I reckon it's goin' to take a heap o' bruisin' — hee-hee!" He raised the bottle. "Here's to Golgotha and de health o' de serpent and de seed o' de woman — and de devil take de hindermost!"

He put the bottle to his lips, tilted back his head, and drank the fiery spirit to the dregs. He spluttered from the strength of it.

"Ho-ho! he-hee!" he cackled — and wagged his head and chuckled. "A heap o' bruisin'! a heap o' bruisin'!"

CHAPTER XI

*Wherein Mistress Deborah Bryan finds that the
Ways of the Gods are Inscrutable*

THE night was graying to the dawn as Deborah Bryan hurried down a by-street in Port Royal. She was breathless with running. She stopped outside a house from which came the faint sounds of a fiddler playing the last bars of a superannuated dance-tune. Through the open horizontal slats of the jalousies the lamplight within was paling in the cold light of the coming day. The panting woman rested for a breathing space against the planking of the outer wall, and gathering up the hem of her skirt she wiped the perspiration from her face and neck. Her thin cotton bodice, wet with sweat, and her bedraggled cotton skirts, limp from the dews of the bush and swamp through which she had lately passed, and further sullied by the swillings of the leaky canoe, clung close to her slim little body, and the moist breath of the dawn added to their bedragglement. Her mouth was parched with anxious purpose. But as she listened, the strained look in her eyes gave way to a gleam of triumph — the fiddler was

still fiddling. There was a shuffle of dancing feet.

"Thank Gahd!" she muttered, "the Lord have delivered she into my hands." And she gripped her fingers together cruelly.

Within the house the fiddle stopped its jiggings, and the dancing feet ceased shuffling.

Deborah moved stealthily to the open door and looked in; then stepped boldly down the entrance-hall. She had reached the scene of a dance just as the last guests were taking refreshments before leaving. Indeed, as she peeped in, the coloured fiddler, with his violin tucked under his arm, was standing at the inner door, his nose in the dun froth of a pint-pot of stout; and he had the bad taste to leave it there instead of answering her whispered query as to whether Jezebel Huckleback had yet left. Peering into the room beyond, her eyes ranging over the four or five couples still left and now seated regaling themselves, she espied Jezebel. That much over-dressed widow, sunk in a cloud of muslin fineries, was lolling back in a rocking-chair, fanning herself with her handkerchief, and, in reply to the amorous sea-captain at her side, was declaring with all the arts and coy tricks of a somewhat robust coquetry that she did not mind what the drink was so that it were long enough, but she thought stout would do.

The sea-captain bawled jovially to the serving-man; and on that old negro worthy rousing from his uneasy slumber upon a hard-bottomed chair and making a shuffling appearance — cramped from the discomfort of his resting-place, one eye shut and the other drowsily blinking — the skipper roared in a thickish fog-filled voice for a bottle of Jezebel's desire, dinning it into the sleepy fellow's heavy ears at the same time that he himself yearned for a stiff tot of rum, untainted with water, as — so he averred with an extravagant oath as one having knowledge of the scheme of creation — God had originally intended it should be taken.

Deborah Bryan, scowling by the door, saw her chance and took it. She stepped lightly down the passage, passed swiftly round to the supper-room, and entered the little serving-place.

The sleepy old shuffling negro cheerfully accepted her offer to get the stout into a tankard whilst he poured out the spirits. As the gray daylight was increasing, she put out the already paling flame of the lamp, thereby restoring somewhat the chill gloom of the early dawn throughout the room. She placed the bottle of stout between her knees, stooped, and, pursing out her lips, wrenched out the cork and filled the pewter pot with the foaming black liquor. But she was hard put to it

to get the poisoned spirits into Jezebel's tankard, for the skipper had begun to bawl for the liquors most impatiently. She gave a quick glance at the shuffling old negro, turned her back to him, whipped the poisoned bottle from amongst her skirts, and with nervous eagerness poured the dark fluid into the midst of the frothing stout. The old serving-man, shambling towards her, cursed her for putting out the light, snatched the tankard from her, set it upon a tray beside the glass of rum, and shuffled off into the room. Deborah Bryan, peering through the crevice of the door-hinge, saw him go to the seated couple.

Jezebel lifted her tankard, and the sea-captain his glass — they clinked their vessels together to each other's very good healths — and Jezebel, putting her tankard to her lips, winked over the froth at the old serving-man, and, glancing gayly towards the sea-captain, drained the vessel to the dregs. She wiped her handkerchief across her mouth, and with a light laugh tossed the empty pewter into the skipper's lap. The sudden assault caused the skipper to spill some of the liquor down his chin and over his shirt-front. He bounced, but laughed good-naturedly a big hoarse laugh, dried his chin with a great bandanna handkerchief, and, gazing at Jezebel admiringly, called her a rollicking old she-dog.

Jezebel giggled archly :
“ Flatterer ! ” said she.

Deborah Bryan slipped out of the house, and, running down the street to the sea, rinsed out the bottle four times, and, breaking it with a stone, flung the pieces out over the heaving waters. She hurried back to the house, stepped swiftly down the entrance-hall, and so again into the serving-room, where the old negro attendant was once more lying uncomfortably doubled-up in his hard seat, snoring heavily.

Deborah Bryan, her eye close held to the chink of the door-hinge, feverishly watched for signs of coming dissolution in her victim — foamings at the mouth, the agonies of a fearful tetanus, tremblings of racked limbs, falling sickness — she lusted for these things with a horrible gluttony of evil desire ; yearned for their speedy commencement ; trembled the while lest Death should strike too mercifully swiftly. But Death passed by the reckless Jezebel as though he too were amorously careful of her favour. The minutes passed into a quarter of an hour — the draught gave Deborah Bryan a cold in her eye and chilled her to her marrow, standing there in her thin drenched cottons ; but Jezebel Huckleback proceeded gayly with her immodest dalliance. Indeed, she showed no slightest ill-effect from the drained tankard,

except perhaps an increased giddiness of demeanour and a somewhat flamboyant breadth of humour in her conversation with the man from the sea. But even so, she only adapted herself with easy breeding to her company, for, when all is said, the sea-captain did not appreciate subtleties.

It was now clear daylight. The master of the ceremonies, a stout negro in black swallow-tail'd coat, lay snoring in a rocking-chair at the other end of the room, his chin sunk in a billow of his voluminous white shirt-front. He slept so soundly that one giddy coloured lady, with a pretty conceit in horseplay, as she went out, took a spray of roses from her shoulders and, unheeded, set the drooping buds rakishly in a wreath upon his wool. The other guests quietly slipped away. At last Jezebel arose from her chair and smoothed her gloves and stroked her skirts; the sea-captain, cumbrously rising also, stretched himself, and, accompanying her, they walked down the room together, the last guests to go. She took his arm as she stepped out into the roadway with him, and they strolled off down the street.

Deborah Bryan, wide-eye'd with astonishment, watched them depart; came out upon the doorstep in her bedraggled clothes; stood, her head thrust forward, her mouth agape, her arms akimbo, and watched them go — dumbfounded; saw that as

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they were about to turn the corner of the street, the skipper rudely threw his clumsy arm round about Jezebel and hugged her; and she struggling to get free, he gripped her to him and, bending down, kissed her upon the mouth — she broke loose from him and slapped his head, whereon they both laughed and lurched out of sight.

A white cockerel flew up clumsily on to the wall opposite, scratched on the coping aggressively, then, standing up against the radiant glory of the sunrise, he rose upon his toes and crowed shrilly.

“ Damn ! ” said Deborah Bryan, and spat upon the doorstep.

CHAPTER XII

Wherein the Widow Tiffles Forgets

WHEN, in the chill of the sweet-breath'd early morning, the dew-damp dingy town of Port Royal began to wake up and get astir, and tousled slipshod negresses came yawning to the doors and scratched themselves, and hailed each other across the streets at the top of their sleepy voices, with wheezy cachinnation starting the morning gossip at the point where it had been left the night before, there was found roaming aimlessly about the streets a mad old woman. As she made her way mumbling down the road towards the slovenly tattling groups that stood about the gutters, the ill-kempt gossips ceased their chatter and separated, slinking back mute and startled into their houses; but, once inside, skipping down passages, running up stairs, creeping a-tip-toe to the verandahs, and, with bated breath, peeping down at the old wandering woman through the chinks of the shut jalousies as she slowly passed by in the street below—for they feared the evil that comes from the touch of a frenzied woman. They saw that she was arrayed

to her heels in a dark cotton gown, bound about the middle with a richly wrought girdle ; her head was almost hidden in a red head-cloth, and her black little withered face was streaked with dark stains. She wandered inconsequently hither and thither, the strange light of madness in her vague eyes, and now for a stave or so she would sing a queer uncouth lilt in quavering broken falsetto, and now she would tuck up her skirts and, with bare ankles unduly displayed, the lean black shanks shod at their extremities in ungainly carpet-slipper, she would dance some extravagant doddering steps of weak accomplishment, then she would fall to mumbling again and pacing the street, or stoop and clutch from the road a handful of dust in her gaunt fingers, and pour it carefully into her pocket as though it were some precious thing.

And they saw that it was the husk of the woman whom they had once known as the widow Tiffles — her reason altogether gone from her.

When she passed out of the street the slattern gossips slipped out of their doors and met at the gutter and got to whispering again ; and it was breathed about that in the early 'tween-lights of the dawn several had heard a weird singing in their sleep, and had turned uneasily in their beds, yet could not rid themselves of the singing.

But the whispering knots of gossips, wagging

wise chins, and arms akimbo, were suddenly broken up and scattered a second time into their houses, for the staring old woman had again appeared amongst them. In the dead silence of the suddenly deserted place, within full ken of many unseen watchful eyes, she came, mumbling incoherently, or uttering abrupt ululations, and sat down upon the doorstep of a young woman who was in childbirth; and the women from behind their jalousies peeped fearfully at the giddy-brained old creature where she sat, being filled with dread for the young mother of the unborn child, for the blear-eyed widow Tiffles with lean bent shoulders crouched over something she held in her hand, crooning and slobbering over it, and singing low.

On either side of the doorstep, on which the crouching old woman sat and mumbled, were set all the water vessels of the house, that Death might pass by, having no water within in which to cool his sting; set there also with some touch of thrifty care that, Death entering the house, the water might not be wholly laid waste.

Then the peeping eyes saw Deborah Bryan come tripping up the street, glancing anxiously to right and left as she came, as though in search of something she sought; saw her run to that which had once been the widow Tiffles, and, taking her hand, lead her gently away.

But there was one woman, more shamelessly inquisitive than the rest, who followed Deborah and her mother; and she, after a while, came back to the gossiping groups that had collected again along the gutters, and told them with hushed breath how when Deborah had brought the demented old woman to her home she took her aside into a room and coaxed her to show what mystic thing she held gripped in her hand—and how after much persuading, with suspicious eyes, shy shrinkings, and anxious cooings, the widow Tiffles had loosened her ancient fingers and showed her treasure—and that it was the little hand of a stillborn child.

“Gahd!” said one of them. And they all opened their mouths and whispering echoed “Gahd!”

Then a woman yawned, and said she must borrow a broom and get to her sweeping; so they straggled off each to their day’s work and thought of other things.

CHAPTER XIII

Wherein Deborah Bryan breaks into the House of the Soothsayer, and finds no God in all the Machinery.

DEBORAH BRYAN was exceedingly angry. In the deepening dusk she sat spectre-like and alone in the stern of a dug-out canoe, and with her two hands drove the battered paddle into the lumpy waters, giving a vicious thrust now on one side of the craft and now on the other. Her head was swathed in white cloths, out of which her shrewish little black face peered keenly. Her lips muttered as she, sitting there, rose and fell on the low ground-swell. In the gloom, the murky waters under her, catching the last lingering light from the darkening heavens, reflected it upwards into her sulky scowling face.

“Gahd!” said she, “dat fool feller call heself a obeah-man! — huh! *I'll rub he's head wid a rock-stone, and knock de sparks out ob he's emotions.*”

She spat with contempt.

The dug-out rose and fell gently, surging forward at each powerful stroke of the sinewy arm that propelled the paddle-blade, and falling away again on the finished stroke.

The last flush of the sunset magnificence was long dead, swallowed into gloom; night was gathering over the land, and everything was now the colour of darkness.

Deborah Bryan kept the dingy craft within a stone's throw of the shadowy low-lying shore which lay, mangrove-fringed, to the sea at her right hand. All the air was still—over the swamps a mighty hush—save that out of the mists of the gloom came the swish of the sluggish tide as the slow-heaving billows swept along the mangrove-bushes of the shore.

The canoe suddenly grated over the face of a sunken rock, and slid again into deeper water.

“Gahd-a-mighty!” said Deborah Bryan, her eyes wide-staring, and for a while forgetful of her spleen, “I guess de leaky ole concern done struck up agin a rock-stone—I reckon dat rock-stone must ‘a take’d a consider’ble amount o’ de bark offen of de bottom o’ de ole slop-pail. Huh! it was a mighty lucky circumstance I don’t able to find de widow Johnson to borrow de ole affair from she—I reckon Providence done had a hand in de business. Declare to gracious I was mighty near askin’ she for de loan ob de thing.”

She urged the dug-out round a bend of the mangrove-covered swamps—there was the thud and hiss of the sea swishing upon bare rocks and

stones. She swung round the head of the craft, and, plunging the paddle right and left and right and left, she drove the swaying nose of the canoe towards the rocky gap in the bushes.

As the land loomed close to her she flung down the paddle, scrambled along the seats, and seizing the rope that lay in the bows as the canoe bumped on to the rocks, she gathered up her skirts and leaped out. She dropped like a cat on all fours; clutching a boulder, resisted the outward drift of the boat; and got up on to her feet.

As she stood up in the gloom, peering into the darkness about her, she noticed a black object on the rocks. She went forward as far as the length of the rope would let her, and peered down at it. A dying vulture, lying on the stones at her feet, beat the ground with its great wings, stretched itself out with a convulsive tremor, and expired.

“Gahd!” said Deborah Bryan, “I never see’d a dead johnny-crow befo’; nevertheless I reckon most things has got to die—excepplin’ only Jezebel.” She shivered. “Things is mighty solemn and onnatchural around here dis evenin’—de sea seems like it were makin’ a heap o’ whisperin’, and talkin’ mighty serious, like it know’d de meanin’ ob things, and den it gits to kind o’ chucklin’.”

She came back to the yawning restless canoe

where it bumped dully against the rocks, and picking her steps along the stones carefully on her bare feet, she dragged the fretting craft round by its water-way to where the thick bush came down into the tide. She pushed the long hull well under the bushes, and creeping in after it, fastened the head-rope to a branch.

The crabs and other creeping and leaping marine things scuttled and scurried away, startling her; a clattering-clawed shelly thing touched her naked foot and frightened her so that the hot sweat burst out over her body and wet her cottons. Stooping down under the low branches, she crept from out the dark shadow of the bush, stood on the rocks, and hitching up her skirts to her knees, fastened them so at the back. The inky treacherous waters rose and fell at her feet, swung along the rocks, swished away amongst the leafy mangrove thickets that lay margent to the sea, and died away into the sombre twilight. Nature was in an august oracular mood, her whispering voice raising in the gloom the ghosts of unknown unpleasantnesses which fearsome imagination clothed in fantastic garb so that they walked about the dim world in the crude habit of real things. Deborah Bryan preferred the daylight and a brass band — she liked to know what made the music. She felt an uncanny urging upon her to go back, but

"turnin' back brings de bad luck," said she fearfully; and Deborah Bryan had crossed the harbour in a leaky canoe to have it out with the sorcerer and get her money back — her lips set doggedly. She looked out to sea; her eyes were travelling over the past few hours — Jezebel alive — Boaz under arrest — the reason gone out of the widow Tiffles, whom she had left sitting on the doorstep, crooning, and nodding her head, and munching her gums — the landlord clamouring vulgarly, threateningly, for his rent; to be sure, she, standing on her doorstep, had put him to scorn before the whole street, he having little repartee — her eyes glittered — oh yes, she had had the wit of him, but — he had the law of her. Deborah Bryan frowned, and, in her spleen, stamped her bare foot upon the wet rock so that it smarted her. She dived under the bushes, and hunted her carpet slippers out of the canoe. Then she scrambled out again, put on the shoes, turned resolutely, clambered up the rocks on noiseless feet, and, stepping towards the vague path, plunged into the dark jungle of the bush. She pushed forward along the uncertain track. The air was heavy with stillness. The myriad insects, which give voice to the tropic night, had not yet begun to stir. But as she brushed against the bush, hosts of mosquitoes and other stinging flies rose along

her path and swarmed and “ pinged ” about her, screaming to vent their spite upon her, yet the utmost of their shrill piping scarce moved the ponderous silence.

She left the swamps of the salt-ponds on her left, and after a while the ground began to rise. The marshy stench of the swamps was still in her nostrils, and the bush was clammy and dank, but the earth was warmer to her feet, and drier.

As she neared the ruin where the old sorcerer had his dwelling, the hush was suddenly broken by the scuffling noise of something that leaped from her path and scuttled into the bush. She stopped timidly. She heard a noise as of beating wings near her feet. Her heart was thumping against her side, and there was a fluttering in her throat : again the appalling stillness fell over all and further frightened her. The jungle-growth was becoming thinner, and on the branches against the sky she could see the black silhouettes of sleeping vultures at roost ; but nothing was stirring.

She stood and listened. Not a sound.

“ Gahd of Hosts ! ” said she with difficult breath, “ it are so mighty still I kin almost hear de grass growin’.”

She pushed on again ; again some lumpish thing leaped out of the darkness at her feet and bounced into the bush — and another, and another. And again came the thrashing sound of wings.

She clambered up some boulders, and parted the bushes. She stood before the house of the sorcerer.

She crept stealthily up to the door and listened.

There was a beating of many wings. It came to the ears of Deborah Bryan like the fluttering sound of the headless bodies of fresh-killed cockerels, flung upon the floor by the old African, making sacrifice.

She pushed the door slowly open. Out of the darkness within, a sick buzzard pecked at her feet viciously, and, too weak to reach her, snapped his beak, then hopped and tumbled into the darker depths of the room. Her skin itching with fear, Deborah Bryan bent forward and peered into the place. Upon the ground in the near gloom she could see several dark objects lying. Nerving herself, she crept a step further in, straining her eyes towards them. Several vultures lay dead upon the floor. There was not a sound stirring.

"Is yo' there, king?" she asked in a hushed voice. "Is yo' there?"

"Yo' there?" said a whisper queryingly. But it was not the voice of the sorcerer.

"King," she asked fearfully, "how come yo' don't speak to me?"

"Speak to me!" whispered the voice.

"I is come about Obeah!" she said. The sweat of a great dread came upon her.

"Hee-yah!" jeered the answer.

"Livin' Gahd!" said she.

"Gahd! gahd! gahd!" chuckled the walls, beyond her, beside her, above her.

She started, and waited in frightened silence.

"Gahd! it are kind o' skeery here," she muttered. "Dat so."

"Dat so!" whispered the echoes of the walls.

She knew the accustomed smell of the dirty ill-kept place — the bitter scent of stale tobacco, together with the other sickly unclean stenches — but out of the midst of it all there now came to her nostrils a strange odour, the faint sour smell of the dead.

Her eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom, and the darkness began to yield her shadowy meaning. In the midst of the shadows upon the floor she could now see a large black object lying, on which some dimly-outlined vultures sat. Upon the floor near her feet gleamed several scattered pieces of silver. She stooped to put her hand out to one, but it was beyond her reach. She was quaking with fear, but she took another stealthy step forward towards the piece of silver. She reached out her hand towards it — some one coughed; she drew back her hand in affright, her tongue dried in her mouth, and the perspiration burst out on the palms of her hands.

There was a beating of wings all round and about her. Deborah, dry-mouthed with fear, crouching in terror there, glared with staring eyes into the darkness before her. Her fear of a sudden increased her vision, so that she saw — and seeing, uttered a low cry: the black mangled thing, that lay staring up at her out of the eyeless sockets, wore the patched trousers that the old sorcerer had stripped from a drowned sailor; she saw the gleam of the great brass buckle upon the black leather belt about his middle, and it came to her that the ghastly, rent, and disembowelled mass of flesh that sent up the sickly smell of death into her senses must once have been the besotted old sorcerer; but that which had been a human being, save for the grinning sightless head, lay shapeless now as offal flung upon a dunghill.

Suddenly she saw this thing, and as suddenly it was blotted out — her vision went. She reeled backwards and clutched at the doorpost.

“Gahd!” she said hoarsely, “I must ‘a take’d de wrong bottle.”

A sickening vulture coughed, and startled her. And again there came to her ears sounds as of the old sorcerer making sacrifice as he flung down the headless cockerels upon the ground, and again she heard the last beatings of the convulsive fluttering wings.

A dying vulture leaped near her feet, and lashed its great wings upon the ground, struggling in the last tetanous throes of a fearful agony ; and the sound of the beating of many wings passed across the place.

As Deborah shivered, so fear-filled there, afraid to come, afraid to go, the pale moon rising above the bush shed down her mystic beams, and the wan light passed her shoulder and fell athwart the blind idol where it stood on the ledge in its ungainly straddle — and she saw that the idol smiled.

She reached out her hand, and, staring with unwilling eyes of fear into the haunted place, she shut the door carefully and walked hurriedly away. As she stepped towards the dark gap in the bush she hesitated and looked back. Above and about the evil-smelling ruins, in the evening hush that lay gently upon the world the fireflies twinkled in little showers of sparks, and flashed and sparkled before the hovel. The deep blue sapphire night had come down and taken possession of the earth, turning the harsh realities of the day into the dainty imaginings of the vague realm of dreams — changing its crudities and commonplaces into a dainty fairyland to greet the mysterious spirit of the fantastic moon.

There was some sickness amongst the vultures that season.

AFTERPIECE



CHAPTER XIV

Which Ends with the Wauling of Cats

THE moon was throwing slight shadows.

Down the straggling street, that lay gray
in the gloom, the light of Huckleback's
lodging-house shone pale yellow. As I came op-
posite, walking down the middle of the road, the
potman was lighting the lamp in the grog-shop
below, talking in low tones to a sailor who lolled
with his back against the counter and spat con-
templatively out into the street regardless of
passers-by, and who, at the pauses when the pot-
man's tongue ceased wagging, said "That's so!"

I looked up. There was a low-voiced conver-
sation going on in the balcony above. Jezebel
was lolling back in a rocking-chair, flirting with
the merchant-skipper of a trading brig; he leaned
against the balustrades, bending towards her in
what was meant to be an attitude of amorous ten-
derness, toying clumsily with the siren. She was
in white muslins. As her eyes caught mine, she
sat up and leaned forward over the balcony rails.
She uttered a nervous laugh, then, giving a silly
giggle, knocked the grog out of the skipper's hand.

The glass glittered and fell, smashing into a hundred tinkling pieces in the street — the liquor flew wide and swished on the pavement.

“ Damn ! ” cried the skipper.

Jezebel tittered. She got up, shook herself, and, glancing over her shoulder, flaunted through the open window into the house, affectedly humming a snatch of song.

The skipper’s eyes followed her admiringly.

“ Damn ! ” cried he again, and bawled for another drink.

He looked down at me, and winked a drowsy eye slowly. He stood there, his great hands upon the rail of the balcony, and he spoke like a man who would have no saying of his put to the question.

“ That’s a dam pert sassy female,” said he, with the air of a connoisseur of these things. “ Damn my authority if that female — hic — ain’t fit to command my brig ! D’ye hear ? ” he roared, like a fog-horn.

He paused.

No one damned his authority. And I let the brig go at that, reckoning that the superseded captain would still box the compass and steer by the technicalities.

He smote the rail with his huge hand, and the balcony shook.



"By the living bilgewater!" — he jerked his thumb over his shoulder — "that's a *woman* — though she *has* made god-forsaken waste of good liquor." And he laughed. . . . He fixed his blood-shot eyes on me. "Don't talk to me of your blasted chastity. . . . Give me, Tom Higginbottom, a woman with the love of man in her. . . . It was landsmen as started nunneries." He scowled at me. "Landsmen! d'ye hear?" he roared. . . . He spat over the rail. "Seafarin' folk can't abide nunneries. . . . I tell ye, nature abhors a nunnery as she abhors a vacuum — and other damn nonsense. . . . A sea-farin' man don't go agin nature — and Providence. . . . We has to take the love o' women where we can find it . . . though I'm not denying it do lead to promiscuous courtin'. . . . Nature don't make women in the image of a nunnery. . . . Women ain't built on them lines, any more nor a schooner's built for cruisin' on wheels . . . damme, what *I* say is — follow nature! . . . I've been at sea, boy and man, blurry nigh on twenty-seven year — and I say — follow nature!"

I did not stay his robustious oratory to show him that it is against nature not to abide by the woman when courted — it's but wasting truth to display his fallacies to a man drunk with wine or bad philosophy.

He swung his arm round and brought down his fist — but missed the rail and nearly fell. Clutching out at the balustrade he steadied himself. “I *always* — follow — nature,” said he; and added with a giggle — “especially when she’s a female.”

He licked his dry lips.

“ Ho-ho ! Yus, sir . . . give me, Tom Higginbottom — hic — a woman with the — hic — love of man in her, say I.”

He hiccoughed ; and, swinging round, lurched heavily through the open window, bumped against the jamb, and disappeared into the lighted room within. Then he laughed — and a fine sea-going laugh it was — and fell among some chairs.

The marine ideal of womanhood is somewhat robust and crude and limited.

Suddenly I saw before the blackness of an open doorway near at hand an old ragged negro standing in the gloom ; he turned his black ape-like face upon me, and under the shadow of the slouched gray hat his eyes gleamed. He grinned.

“ Hee-hee ! ” he cackled, “ de white man puts de black man into de gutter — ho-ho ! — but de white man goes into de house of de black woman — hee-hee ! — ho-yes ! ” He grinned evilly. “ Ho-yes ! de white man comes to de land of de black man — and puts de black man in de gutter — but he kisses de black woman upon de mouth — and so he shall rot — and rot — and rot ! ”

Here he spat at me ; and the filthy spittle struck my boot. I stepped up to the foul rogue, and swung my cane to lay it upon him —

There was nothing where he stood.

But out of the dusk there came a husky cackling. . . .

As I was about to turn out of the street I hesitated and looked back. A woman's light laugh was in the air.

Nearby, on a roof-ridge, silhouetted against the night sky, sat two cats. They sat facing each other, and one lashed his tail twice. Then they put down their ears ; craned out their necks cautiously till their noses met ; sprang back suddenly ; jumped nervously a-tiltœ ; and slapped each other's heads — crying sad amorous cries.

The last I heard of Jezebel she was sharing her favours between a sea-captain and a polygamous subaltern in barracks.

THE END







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